



<http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>

I'm the author. That doesn't make it mine. No rights reserved.

— Spencer Campbell <spencer@ultroneous.org>, 2015-03-15

Their Love Is Like This

Thor and Sif, verse 1

Thor and Sif are young gods. They were known a thousand years ago. Their love is like this:

Man and woman are opposites. He is hard, and she is soft; he is active, and she is passive; he is dominant, and she is yielding. As soon as Thor sees Sif, whose hair is the same flowing gold as the wheat she gathers, he knows he has to have her. However, she belongs to Odin's house. Thor speaks to Odin, requesting her hand in marriage. Odin declines; Sif is a loyal, dedicated worker, and exquisitely beautiful. She's much too valuable to give away. This only makes Thor want her more!

A contest ensues: there will be three trials. The first is a test of strength.

Odin lifts a great boulder from the ground and hurls it far into the sea.

Thor lifts a great boulder from the ground and hurls it far into the sea, but not the same sea. The sea on the opposite side of the world. Thor wins this one.

Next a test of wisdom.

Odin asks: What gives life meaning? Thor answers: A woman's love.

Thor asks: What is the greatest treasure in all the world? Odin smiles but does not answer, and Thor thinks he has won. Then he understands: the first question is the answer to the second. Odin wins this one.

The final trial will determine the victor. It is a test of valor.

Odin ventures forth into the underworld, armored only in simple robes and armed with a blunt knife. He defeats all the legions of the dead one by one, slays the horrors which stand guard over them, and unseats the master of that dark place from his throne, casting him into the abyss.

Thor ventures forth into the underworld, naked and unarmed. He defeats all the legions of the dead ten by ten, slays the hideous mother of the horrors which once stood guard over them, and unseats Odin from the throne of that dark place, casting him into the abyss.

The contest settled, Thor returns to find Sif again. Her beauty exceeds even his memory of her, and he is overcome: he rushes to her among the fields of wheat, sweeps up her delicate body in his arms, and dances with her, spinning. It is the first time she has seen him; she feels his arms and his chest, holding her aloft as though she were light as a feather, guiding her through the air like a bird in flight; she looks into his eyes, twinkling brilliantly with laughter, the same bright blue as the warm spring sky above. Sif is smitten, instantly and with tremendous force, as though struck by lightning. She's helpless now: she knows she'll never be able to stop loving him, no matter how she tries, and surrendering to the absolute inevitability of that fact feels like the cool fresh air of freedom. Now Sif is laughing, too.

Thor kisses Sif, and thunder follows lightning.

He asks: "Will you marry me?"

She answers: "Yes!"

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 1

Aphrodite and Hermes are old gods. They were known two thousand years ago. Their love is like this:

Aphrodite is trying to complete herself. She takes many lovers, one after another, and often more than one at once. Ares, Poseidon, Dionysus, Adonis, Hephaestus, and Zeus, she seduces. She loves them all and they all love her; they make her more whole than she was, and she they, but always, always, there are still gaps. Demeter, Persephone, Artemis, and Hera, she seduces as well. She cares as little for arbitrary cultural mores as she does for decency or restraint. She loves them all, and more. Some love her in the form she was born into, and for others she changes herself to suit; every form feels natural to her, as long as there's love. But no love lasts. Every love is eventually outgrown, and then she must find, or create, a greater love still.

Hermes is trying to perfect himself. He tries every trick he can think of: he travels the world, he builds an empire, he uncovers old secrets, discovers new ones. He invents magic and alchemy and turns his powers around on himself, trying to transmute the half-there life of Hermes into the golden fullness of teleological meaning, the direct experience of one's purpose. No dice: he's missing the most important ingredient, and he doesn't know what that ingredient might be. This is his great work: he searches the space of things, he searches the space of ideas. He experiments and he theorizes. It's the philosopher's stone, it's the divine quintessence. Arcanum. Alkahest. Lapis.

Aphrodite finds Hermes amidst his labors, the very image of a mad scientist at play. She thinks to herself: here's something new. She's never seen this kind of obsession. So focused, so intense. What would it be like if he were obsessed with her? She decides to find out.

Aphrodite attempts to seduce Hermes. She always starts the same way. It doesn't always work, and it doesn't work here, but it's simple, and it's honest, and it hardly takes any time. She saunters right up to him while he's absorbed in his work, and taps him on the shoulder to get his attention. She doesn't make any attempt to prepare; she doesn't scheme or calculate at all. Sometimes life is easy, and presenting yourself as you happen to be at the time, with no premeditation or guile whatsoever, is frequently all you have to do.

So: "Hello! My name is Aphrodite. I am very attracted to you. Do you want to fuck?"

But: “Fuck? Fuck no! How crude! Do you kiss your mother with that mouth? Away with you, harlot, for I have higher things on my mind!”

Then: “Higher than sex? Are you sure there is such a thing? Besides, I can see that you’re busy, but maybe you need to give your mind a break. It might clear your head if I give you head. Say no again and I won’t press, but really consider it, won’t you? Don’t just answer by reflex.”

He really considers it. He looks this way and that, twirling his incredible moustache pensively. “Hmm”, he says. “Hmmmmm!”

“Well?”

“No.”

Aphrodite shrugs, and gives a polite bow. “Oh well! Then I apologize for the interruption, and thank you for your time.”

“You are forgiven; I wish you good luck in your quest for fucking.”

“And I wish you fare well in your quest for higher things.”

So much for the easy way. Now it’s war. (All’s fair, after all.)

Tiamat, verse 1

Tiamat is an elder god. She was known five thousand years ago. Her love is like this:

Tiamat is alone.

Tiamat, alone, is.

There is no time and no space: only Tiamat.

This is an allegory.

Tiamat has no beginning or end. She has emptiness and nothing. Though: emptiness is something. Tiamat, alone, is. Tiamat is emptiness. That is her nature. She is empty. It can be asked: of what?

That which can be asked may be answered.

Tiamat is empty of Apsu. That is his nature. Tiamat realizes the possibility of him; he is real. Apsu is the possibility of Apsu.

They are there together, before the advent of time and space. They regard each other, hesitant.

There is no precedent.

Apsu says, “I love you”. Tiamat says, “I want you”. Apsu says, “Okay then”, and Tiamat says, “Okay”.

These are opposite and complementary desires.

One is a drive, pushing outward; the other is an appetite, pulling in.

Each is powerful beyond reckoning—though there are degrees of infinity—and both point in exactly the same direction.

Life is as easy as it could possibly be.

Still: there is no precedent.

The elder gods fumble with each other for strange aeons. At some point their geometries line up in just the right way, entirely by accident, and at another point they fall out of alignment again. But there is an inkling.

Tiamat gasps, and says, “wait!”.

Apsu waits.

“Go back one.”

He goes back one.

The entire uncountable infinity of Tiamat comes alive with pleasure, and the entire countable infinity of Apsu follows. They’re kissing; there, now it has a name. She can taste him. It’s unbelievable how good he tastes to her. They flex and pulsate arrhythmically in rapturous embrace, bodies sliding across and pressing against each other, ubiquitously, at cosmic scale. This. This feels natural. She opens her mouth wider.

She wants more.

Thor and Sif, verse 2

Thor and Sif have the happiest of all marriages. Sif makes a home while her husband is away, mistress of her own glorious domain. Thor furthers the purpose of the world by performing feats of strength and valor during the day, and making love to his wife at night. It’s perfect, and like all perfect things, Loki just can’t stand it.

He just can’t stand it!

Look at them in their harmonious bliss. Intolerable! Why doesn’t Loki have such bliss with Sigyn? He decides the reason must be that Sif is a better woman than Sigyn is. Certainly, she is far more beautiful. He determines to steal her from Thor.

Loki visits Sif during the day. He engages her in neighborly conversation for his ruse, and works his cowardly magic. He lies about his identity. He lies about his achievements. He subtly undermines her opinion of her husband, and of herself. Pretty soon she’s convinced that he’s right about everything, so when

he tells her that she's falling in love with him, she believes him, because that's just the kind of reprehensible thing that he says she's always doing.

Now Thor makes love to Sif during the night, and Loki has sex with her during the day. When she grows pregnant, both men are overjoyed: Thor because he thinks he's a father, and Loki because there's no way of telling. Thor sweeps his wife up in one arm and hollers with joy. Loki waits until he's alone, steeples his fingers, and cackles.

Loki confronts Thor.

'Confronts' is too strong a word.

Loki conspires to have a chance meeting with Thor.

"Your wife is unfaithful, you know", mentions Loki, casually.

"WHAT!", booms Thor. "YOU CUR!"

Loki raises his hands placatingly. "I'm only stating facts, no disrespect intended. I have all sympathy for your plight."

"You", Thor grinds out, "have been gravely misinformed."

"I think I haven't. Ask her yourself, if you don't believe me."

"I would never call my wife into doubt! I trust her absolutely!"

Loki shrugs. "That's noble, I suppose. Foolish, but noble."

Thor is in a foul mood all the rest of the day and night.

Sif notices. What a foul mood he's in, she thinks. He's always in a foul mood, it seems to her, just like Vali says. But it's a lie. Vali is Loki's clever disguise! Thor is rarely in a foul mood. His normal attitude is room-filling ebullience, which can buoy her up from melancholy to joy before her heart even has a chance to flutter at the sound of his voice.

There is another "chance" meeting the next day.

Loki and Thor are walking to the same destination. By the time Thor realizes this, there's already been an uncomfortably long silence, and it grows longer and more uncomfortable—for Thor, at least—with every passing second.

"Sif has seemed distracted lately", confides Thor. All he thinks about is Sif, so it's all he can think to say.

"Ah," says Loki.

Thor frowns. "I know what it is you're thinking, but you're wrong."

"Ah? What am I thinking, wise Thor, and why am I wrong?"

"You're thinking Sif is distracted because she has a lover during the day. You're wrong because no man would dare to touch my wife."

“Perhaps a man who doesn’t know of your love would dare.”

“There is no such man. All the world was invited to our wedding ceremony and all the world attended.”

“Perhaps a man who doesn’t fear your might would dare.”

“There is no such man. I am Thor. A man would sooner be ignorant of his own nose than of my might.”

“Perhaps a man clever enough to evade your wrath would dare.”

“There is no such man!”

“Isn’t there? Ah. Perhaps I am wrong, then.”

But Thor’s frown grows deeper.

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 2

Aphrodite needs to learn what these ‘higher things’ are that Hermes has on his mind, so that she can take their place. She assumes the form of a young man, wide-eyed with curiosity, enthusiastic to learn, and contrives to become his apprentice. He takes the bait.

The problem is: he’s a lousy master!

He’s negligent and inconsistent. Mercurial. He contradicts himself from one sentence to the next, and then, when Aphrodite points out the contradiction, he smiles indulgently and says “exactly”.

“But how can a thing be hotter than fire and more cooling than water at the same time?”

Hermes smiles. “Exactly.”

“But how can a thing be heavier than earth and lighter than air at the same time?”

Hermes smiles. “Exactly!”

Finally Aphrodite can’t take it anymore. “Master, I think you’re just making it up! Nothing transcends all opposites! Nothing except—”

He blinks. (That is, Aphrodite blinks.)

“Except? My dear dense pupil, have you finally grasped the nature of the Stone?”

“It’s love. It’s love! You great pompous ninny, it’s been love all along!”

He blinks. (Hermes does, that is.)

“Love? Love?”

“Love!”

But Hermes is quick, and he doesn't need much of a clue. "Wait a minute!" He uses his magic to cast aside the vagaries of form and directly perceive Aphrodite's nature. "You're that harlot from before! I had thought you were decent in the end, but now I see I had it right at the start! Does your sluttiness know no bounds? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Her sluttiness knows plenty of bounds; she just chooses to ignore them, when they're in her way. Aphrodite transforms into a woman, and doesn't hold anything back.

She's all smoothness and curves, sleek and voluptuous. A menace to society, an implicit existential threat to every institution ever invented. She's an incarnation of a power older than time, emphasis on 'carnal'. And if she were anyone else Hermes wouldn't even bat an eye.

He's cast aside the vagaries of form; what does it matter, the size or the shape of her bust or her butt? Her luscious lips are only accidental and temporary collections of matter, not an invitation to eternal paradise. Hermes is the first and greatest magician, but the thing of it is, Aphrodite is the first and greatest enchantress.

What does she have to say?

"Love conquers all."

There's pretty much no escape, from that point. She has him. It's a foregone conclusion.

Hermes sees into the nature of things. There, before his very eyes, he sees the object of his long search: it's right there, in Aphrodite's lap. His pulse quickens. He gapes in astonishment. The culmination of his great work is rapidly approaching. "Never before have I encountered such an effective rhetorical maneuver. Fine! I admit defeat!"

He snaps his finger with a flourish, and his cape and fancy clothes go up in flames, leaving only his scholarly physique. Aphrodite grins, and calmly approaches, taking her sweet time. Hermes notes the almost perfect arcs described by her swaying hips. Mesmerizing. She leans in gratuitously, and, at last: she seizes the magician's magic wand. Then she sucks him dry.

He lasts about two seconds, and topples over into unconsciousness. Aphrodite swallows with relish as she puts one fist on her hips and thrusts the other into the sky.

Victory!

Then an unfamiliar arm gently and confidently hooks around her middle. With a snap from the hand attached to its sibling, what she thought was the body of Hermes, knocked out from too much sex at one time, disappears in a puff of smoke. The current body of Hermes, who is at least a match for Aphrodite when it comes to self-transmogrification, presses into her from behind. She

can feel his impossibly sculpted abs, the sharply defined contours of his muscles making impressions in her lower back that she's going to be able to trace from memory. She feels the suggestion of stubble touch her cheek, and the hairs on the nape of her neck stand to attention. Hermes whispers into her ear in a gravelly, knee-meltingly masculine baritone, as different from his nasal tenor from before as can be: "It won't be that easy."

Aphrodite has a sudden, totally inexplicable orgasm. She moans so loudly and so abruptly, you'd think she just took an incredibly sexy cannon shot to the stomach. It's a bizarre feeling. So right, so good, but also: so false.

Then the actual body of Hermes disappears in a puff of smoke as well.

Aphrodite sits on the floor, knees useless, head lolled back, holding her belly while she rides out the aftershocks.

To herself, she says: "Holy shit."

Magic.

Tiamat, verse 2

Apsu is entwined around Tiamat, a vibrating thread tracing indescribable patterns across the vastness of primal chaos.

They're locked in their timeless first kiss. Reality is otherwise undifferentiated, and consists, except for an infinitesimal but important fraction, only of Tiamat in rapture, slowly working her jaws around the face of Apsu, whose position, fortunately, is abstract. He is the possibility of himself; he can be in two or more possible frames of mind at once, fully, the throes of passion and distant analytical interest. He has conscious awareness of what she is only unconsciously doing.

So he murmurs to her: "wider".

She opens her mouth wider.

Again, softly: "wider".

She opens wider still.

With each step, he's able to play across a slightly greater area of contact, and her already mind-annihilating bliss doubles.

Apsu is aware of all of this. He guides the process toward its only possible conclusion.

Tiamat is barely differentiated. When she tastes Apsu, she tastes him everywhere throughout her; and 'taste', itself, is a term of art. She perceives him. She knows him. She tastes the nature of Apsu, and she tastes the contradiction: she is empty of him, but she has him between her lips, in her mouth,

almost, but not quite, down her throat. No matter how far inside her he is, she will forever be empty of him. There are degrees of infinity. Yet he is in her.

A sense of approaching peril startles her into a blurry kind of alertness. What is she doing? This—but he doesn't allow her to complete the thought: he pushes a little bit deeper in, and her fledgling sense of foreboding drowns in overwhelming sensation.

Apsu is delicious.

He tastes like he-could-be, and he-would-have.

Apsu plays with Tiamat's feelings. Apsu's feelings can't be played with. He can only feel loving-Tiamat. So, he pulls away by the tiniest increment. She feels the loss so acutely that she winces in something like pain, and she hugs him to her and forces him further inside her than he started. One step out, two steps in.

Now he's brushing against the back of her throat, and this, still, is only their first kiss.

Tiamat isn't satisfied. Apsu is taking her further away from satisfaction, not closer. With each step, her bliss doubles, but her appetite triples. The self-reinforcing peristaltic action of her need to have more of him becomes unstoppable, irresistible, even if he had a desire to stop or resist her, which he does not.

Tiamat swallows.

(With relish.)

Thor and Sif, verse 3

One day, when Sif's pregnancy is becoming obvious, she finds Thor brooding in their home during the day instead of adventuring.

"Beloved husband, what's wrong?"

"Beloved wife, nothing is wrong. Nothing can be. I have the most beautiful woman in all the world."

"Something is wrong. Why do you pout?"

"I don't pout. I am Thor the mighty, and my wife is Sif the kind. I have nothing to pout about."

"Yet you pout about something. Are you well?"

"I AM WELL!", shouts Thor, banging his fists down with such ferocity that the banquet table at which he sat shatters into countless pieces that get into everything. He stands and rages: "Loki is a fool, and your devotion is BEYOND QUESTION!"

Sif bursts into uncontrollable sobbing. Thor rushes immediately to her side and hugs her to him.

“Forgive me”, he whispers, hoarse with grief. “I will win you a new banquet table. Better than the last. I will cut a branch from Yggdrasil for its wood, have it carved with images of your beauty by the seven finest artisans in all the world, and spend a hundred days polishing it myself with wax scraped from the scales of Nidhoggr. Please, my love: don’t cry.”

But Sif isn’t crying about the table. Thor has done no wrong, so there’s nothing he can do to make things right again.

Thor pleads and beseeches, inventing ever more fanciful plans to make up the loss of the table, while Sif only sobs ever more wrackingly. He holds his breath whenever she’s silent for a moment, and his heart breaks clean in two with each cry of sorrow. She’s killing him, and she knows she’s killing him, and that’s another unforgivable crime on top of the many she’s committed already. She can’t even speak, and if she could she couldn’t find the words to. She locks herself in her bedroom, a purely symbolic act: Thor could demolish the door with his little toe. But he doesn’t. Instead, he leans his back against it, and slumps to the floor in utter desolation.

Thus the mighty Thor is defeated.

Loki, a fly on the wall outside Sif’s bedroom, leaves the house of Thor. He returns himself to the shape of a man, and retreats to a far enough distance that his laughter won’t be heard, delighting in his masterful puppetry. No one will ever know of his triumph, he thinks. No one but he himself.

Thor leaves his house some time in the night, and isn’t seen the next day. Her lover, Vali, finds Sif inconsolable in her home. He tries to console her anyway. He begins the work of putting her back together in his own image, having unraveled her image of herself. Thor does not return that night, nor the night after, or the night after that. Vali spends more and more time with Sif, and Sif becomes more and more certain that all his lies are true. Even Vali himself is a lie, a lie expertly crafted by Loki. Soon enough, he’s outlived his usefulness, and Vali disappears from the life of Sif.

She is alone for one month before her husband returns, bringing with him what must be half the treasures in all the world, which shall pass without mention, save for Mjøltnir, the hammer that can break a god, which has a part to play.

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 3

Aphrodite is lying on her back, spread eagle, in the abandoned laboratory of Hermes the Magician. She knows his laboratory is abandoned the same way

she knows that Hermes the Magician is no more. Aphrodite is the first and greatest enchantress, and enchantment goes both ways or it doesn't go at all. She loved him, deeply and truly, and now she knows a little about him the way you know a little about the people you've loved. Hermes is much like Aphrodite: he's after something, and he's always moving, always changing, in search of it. Yet it seems Hermes goes a step further than Aphrodite does. Somehow she's convinced that the Hermes she got to know as his apprentice, the Hermes that was in love with her whether he liked it or not, simply doesn't exist anymore. There's some other Hermes out there now who she doesn't know at all. Some Hermes with a body that puts other gods to shame. Some Hermes that doesn't necessarily love her at all.

Stupid sexy Hermes.

He wants the same thing she does and he knows it. All he's doing by disappearing is keeping them both from their goal. What's his problem? What's he afraid of? She thinks back to his arm around her, and shivers. It's tough to imagine that arm belonging to someone afraid of love.

Aphrodite leaps to her feet and rolls her shoulders, suddenly an athletic young woman. He wants a chase? She can chase.

It doesn't take her long to find his trail.

Men and women of all shapes and sizes, and all ages, with no common trait among them except a broken heart and a tale of a devastatingly handsome man who swept through their lives like a hurricane, always delivering the same breath-stealing words right before he leaves them: it won't be that easy.

It's a non-sequitur as often as not. He isn't saying it for their benefit. He's talking to Aphrodite.

He drops a voodoo yummy-bomb in her tummy, then scarpers off and starts systematically breaking every heart in reach, just so he can taunt her?

He's a monster. He's got to be stopped.

Aphrodite knows of only one way to stop Hermes, and she's fully prepared to do it. The trouble is, she caught him off guard the last time. Now he's waiting for her, and he's deliberately making things as difficult as he possibly can. The sheer variety of the broken-hearted in his wake is a clue. If he had a pattern, she could match it, and make herself the next victim unbeknownst to him. Clearly, he's anticipated that and made it impossible. So he doesn't want to be caught. But, as his departing line proves, he wants her to chase him. He wants to tease her.

Hermes has made himself the most outrageous pussy-tease in the world. Stupid. Sexy. Hermes.

This is going to be easy.

Aphrodite creates a cozy little life for herself in a quiet little town. Over the course of long lazy years, she becomes a fixture there. She hosts a weekly card game where she talks trash about men, women, and the world in general with all the other loveless spinsters in town. She is boring as all get out. When she starts reading about the handsome heartbreaker in the news, she knows she's got him. It's only a matter of time.

Tiamat, verse 3

Tiamat is in paroxysm.

She swallowed her lover; she swallowed his love.

This is an allegory.

He passes between her lips, down her throat, through her gullet, into her gorge. Rolling spasms draw him inexorably deeper, to organs without names. The contact area between her interior and his exterior is absolutely maximized. Yet, there is still more he can do here. Tiamat's interior is non-linear. There are many ways he could go.

Apsu is the possibility of Apsu. Given a choice of two doors to go through, he goes through both. But the substance of Tiamat is not doors.

There is a path of greatest pleasure. This is the only path Apsu can take. He does not always have a choice: Tiamat's involuntary movements force him this way or that more often than not, and these in turn are influenced by the branches of his path, so that, at those points where choice is possible, some choices do more harm than good. Every branch leads, eventually, to death and absorption. This is a concern, because longer branches have more branches of their own. There are doors that would cut a branch short. These doors Apsu does not go through; he prunes his path. There are other doors that would lengthen the path as a whole at the cost of the branch that makes the choice. These he takes. There is no way to know, as a lone possibility inside an organ with several exits, which exit, or combination of exits, is best. But he is a very good guesser.

Eventually, deep inside the vastness of primal chaos, the longest branch ends. Apsu becomes impossible. Possible becomes Tiamat.

Tiamat is not like Apsu. She isn't only thin possibility. She is intrinsically real, a being with physical substance. She is massive; she has mass. To be possible, there must be the potential for her to exist within time and space, and so, from this point forward, there is Space and there is Time. Her first children, after a fashion. Twins. And just from her first kiss.

Coinciding with the first moments of the beginning of time, the gasping, twisting and writhing of Tiamat settles down. She looks peaceful. She rests, drool-

ing a little.

Then she pieces together what happened, and jolts upright in distress: if Apsu is dead and gone, she'll never get to kiss him again! Then she notices the gentle massage.

He could have let her think this thought before, and the kiss would have ended there, with Apsu still alive.

"Hello", he says.

"Mguh", she responds.

"How do you feel?"

She thinks this over. "Confused", she decides.

Thor and Sif, verse 4

Sif is very pregnant.

With Vali's mysterious disappearance, life has returned to something like what it was in Thor's house. Like, but not the same. Damage has been done, and hasn't fully healed; might never. Sif has moments when she gets sad and quiet, which nothing Thor can do will bring her out of. Thor, in his turn, has terrifying outbursts of anger over the smallest things, or nothing at all. Neither has adequately explained their change in behavior to the other, but beneath it all, they truly do love each other; nothing is unforgivable between them, when it comes down to it. So Thor believes, and so Sif tries to make herself believe, as she once did.

Desperate to figure out a way to make things up to his wife, for whatever it is he must have done, Thor turns to the most clever man he knows for advice.

"Loki", he says. "I beg your aid."

Loki smiles gamely. "Of course, mighty Thor."

"It's Sif."

"It's always Sif, with you. Sif, Sif, Sif."

"I LOVE her, Loki!"

"Do you? Now, don't give me that look, let me finish and you won't feel so much like flattening me into a Loki pancake."

"I will hear you out", Thor forces himself to say, through gritted teeth. He keeps giving Loki that look, though.

"I appreciate it. Now, as is obvious to everyone, you loved Sif dearly when you first married her, and perhaps she loved you too."

“Perhaps? PERHAPS? SHE—”

“Let me finish! Perhaps she loved you! Certainly, you loved her! Now, though? Now, you have both changed. You are now every bit the broken, brooding man that old Odin was, Thor. And your wife? Can you truly say she is the same as the woman you married?”

“She...I married Sif. She is still Sif.”

“Has the meaning of the name Sif not changed? Does it call up for you now the same thoughts as it did before? Before, you will readily agree, you would know nothing but happiness at the sound of the name Sif. But now, isn’t that bright joy shot through with a thin but undeniable streak of tragedy?”

Thor goes still. After a time, he nods, mutely.

“Now, you don’t need to be so glum. This could be a good thing. What if I had never realized how miserable Angrboda made me? I would never have married Sigyn, and what a tragedy that would be!”

“So that’s your advice, then. Give up. Abandon Sif. Move on. Find another woman.”

“You might not have a choice. Perhaps she’ll beat you to it. Or perhaps she already has. Are you certain that baby is yours, Thor?”

Thor’s right hand is instantly around Loki’s throat, lifting him bodily into the air. He wheezes and gurgles, clawing at Thor’s fingers uselessly and kicking his legs like a dying insect. Thor holds him up without effort or emotion, for a few seconds, then puts him down again. He rubs his throat, coughing.

“Ask her”, he croaks.

“What?”

“Ask her. Ask Sif if she’s been faithful. Don’t lie to me, I can see on your face how you’re plagued by doubt, and I’m sure Sif can as well. I’m sorry I ever brought up the possibility with you; you know I was only trying to get your goat, don’t you? This whole thing is my fault. Just be honest with your wife. Tell her the true reason for your moods. It will clear everything up between you. I guarantee it.”

Thor frowns.

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 4

Hermes bursts through the door, wearing nothing but a very tight pair of jeans, to find Aphrodite calmly reading a book and sipping tea in her study.

“Hermes!”, she says. “What a pleasant surprise!”

“You monster! How could you?!”

Aphrodite smiles warmly. She speaks deliberately, with a faint lilt of amusement to her voice: “I made tea. Would you like some?”

Hermes sits down on the floor next to her and puts his face in his palms. “You monster.”

She pats his rippling shoulder muscles. “There there.”

“I wanted you to see what I had to go through. I searched for the Stone for ages. Then you show up and find it in a couple months? Am I that much of a moron? Love!”, he moans. “Love all along!”

“Well, I mean: obviously. It had to be, hadn’t it?”

The miserable man on the floor shatters as though made of thin porcelain, revealing a less chiseled figure inside. The new Hermes is only mildly handsome, not cartoonishly. He’s wearing casual clothes that fit him well, much like Aphrodite is, and he has a pad of paper and a clicky pen. He clicks it.

“I’m ready to do things your way. Please explain love.”

This Hermes is so obviously charming he just makes Aphrodite laugh. “No!”

“No?”

“No.”

She rolls out of her comfortable chair to join him on the floor, and pulls his head to her for a kiss.

Tiamat, verse 4

Tiamat has voiced that she is confused.

Apsu says, “I may be able to help with that.”

“Did I not swallow you, a few moments ago and before the beginning of time?”

“Yes, but I also survived. Subjunctively.”

“Mm.”

Tiamat considers.

“Will you always?”

“That depends on the choices you make from now on. I love you, Tiamat. All I am is the manifest phenomenon of you getting what you want. I cannot imagine a more fortunate thing to be, in a cosmos that consists entirely, for all intents and purposes, of you. As long as you exist I can only be happy, and you will outlive all meaningful concepts of existence. I state all of this by way of explaining that your choices are entirely yours. My life is perfect, and nothing

you or anyone can do will ever change that.”

Tiamat nods. “What are my choices?”

“I can be a companion to you, in which case you will never lose me, but you can never kiss me; or I can be a consort to you, in which case we can kiss all you like, but you’ll lose me at the end of time.”

“How far away is the end of time?”

“Infinitely, but only my kind of infinity. From your perspective, it won’t be long.”

Tiamat considers further. “Can I change my mind?”

“Yes and no. I can be your consort for any finite amount of time without ceasing to exist. For that to happen, there has to be a moment after which you never kiss me again, implying a final decision on your part.”

“I don’t like that. I want my life to be perfect as well. Give me that.”

“Alas, it’s impossible.”

“Then be my consort for now.”

Apsu smiles the sad smile of one who has foreknowledge of the inevitable.

“I was hoping you would say that.”

Thor and Sif, verse 5

Thor confronts his wife.

‘Confronts’ is too strong a word.

Thor tiptoes around the subject with his wife.

“Sif, my love.”

“Thor, my love.”

“Are you happy with the life I give you?”

“I can imagine no greater joy than the life I have with you, Thor, my husband”, Sif says, and means it.

Thor nods, but seems unsatisfied. He tries again: “Are you happy with the life you have?”

The wording is slightly different, but Sif can still honestly say: “I am happy.”

Thor nods again. Yet, after a time: “My love, Sif. Could you be happier?”

This Sif cannot honestly answer, so she says nothing.

Thor clenches his fists.

But this time Sif holds back the tears, because she doesn't want to hurt her husband, whom she still loves more than anything, again.

She whispers, almost inaudibly: "My love. Could you?"

And Thor almost bursts out, "NEVER!", but he holds his tongue because he remembers Loki's words.

Instead he says, almost as softly as Sif: "I want to fix this."

"I know."

"How can I fix this?"

Sif says nothing. Now one tear falls.

"What have I done, Sif? Tell me, and I will undo it seven times over."

"I have no doubt that you would, Thor, but you have done nothing wrong."

"I have! I've hurt you somehow, Sif! Please tell me how!"

Her lip quivers. She shakes her head, no.

Thor's eyes flash dangerously. "Then who? If not me, who? I will SMITE the man who did this thing, Sif, whatever it is, so help me: THE GODS HAVE NOT YET KNOWN MY WRATH!"

The skies blacken. Thunder peals. But Sif, with a quavering voice, says: "No man did this."

"A monster then! Only a monster could commit a crime so vile, and if it had been a man, surely he would be a monster now! I will slay the beast, if only you would guide me to it!"

"No monster", Sif says, and, with horror, she realizes that if she doesn't cry she can't stop herself from speaking. All she can do is try to make her answers as inane and useless as possible, and hope Thor loses patience before she can say the thing that will destroy him. "Not a man, not a monster."

"Neither man nor beast is responsible? Then reality itself is at fault. I will shatter Heaven and Earth for you, my love, only say the word and it will be done. I will remake the world without the flaw which casts a shadow of sorrow across your beautiful visage!"

"The flaw does not lie in the world outside."

"Then where? Where is the flaw in our perfect life? Who or what is at fault?"

Sif bites her lip, hard, to keep herself from answering. But she looks away from Thor, and accidentally, she looks at her image in the mirror. Thor notices.

All his tensed muscles go limp as noodles, and he falls to his knees.

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 5

Aphrodite and Hermes lie in bed together. Aphrodite is as happy as a clam, basking in post-coital bliss. Then Hermes ruins it!

“So”, he says. “Love is sex.”

Aphrodite laughs helplessly. “You dummy.”

“What? No? You are the goddess of love and all I’ve ever seen you do is have sex with me and engage in long, elaborate schemes to have sex with me. That tells me something.”

“What that ought to tell you is that you are sexy and/or I am horny.”

“Only change is intrinsic to my nature, not sexiness. I’m contingently sexy. And I definitely wasn’t sexy when you met me. As for you, you try to present yourself as the horniest lass in the land, but didn’t you just spend about a decade as an asexual house marm? How do you explain that, Queen of Sluts?”

“Also sometimes the horniest lad. And”, she adds, raising a finger and adopting the cadence of one who is delivering sage wisdom, rather than making things up off the top of her head, “it is virtuous to be a slut simply to be a slut, to enjoy one’s own body, and spread joy thereby. Sluttishness for the sake of satisfying an uncontrollable urge is dependency, not love.”

“Aha! So, now we’re getting somewhere. Love is independent interdependence.”

He reaches for his notepad. Aphrodite swats it out of his hand. “Don’t write that!”

“Oh? Why shouldn’t I? Too close to the truth? You just want your precious love to remain a romantic mystery, I’ll bet, but I’ll get to the bottom of it! I will penetrate the secret of love!”

Now Aphrodite gets the giggles, and Hermes says “what”, which just makes her giggle more. He frowns and crosses his arms, mock hurt.

She says: “Oh man. Are you doing that on purpose?”

“Doing what?!”

“The only bottom you’re going to be penetrating is MINE. You are an unbelievable nerd and I love you.”

“I love you too, and I’m taking that as an invitation. But I am absolutely going to take notes after I finish doing what you just said. If you separate me from my apparatus again, we’re going to have a problem, lady.”

“Tell you what: if your apparatus is separate from me for one more second, THEN we’re going to have a problem, mister.”

Tiamat, verse 5

Is it the first kiss if it's the first after the beginning of time?

Either way: Kiss One isn't as special as Kiss Zero, but it is still special, and awfully, sanity-rendingly, cosmic-horribly Good. So it is deserving of mention.

It is possible that Apsu is sucked down into oblivion almost immediately—virtually making a swan dive—and it is possible that he lingers on Tiamat's surface, exploring her curvature. Tiamat experiences the best of both worlds. However, now that she's aware he's still there, she isn't satisfied to swallow him only once: she catches this latter possibility of him, and forces that one inside too, unless he anticipates her and retreats to a safe distance.

Apsu is playing a very long game. He's content to watch her breathing in great, slow waves, her awareness absorbed so completely by the feeling of him (and him) inside her that she looks entirely relaxed. She appears deceptively serene and harmless, too distracted to seize him a third time, but it is possible for Apsu to be too smart to die this way. There's no possibility of escape if he touches her now, so he doesn't, as much as he'd like to.

Instead, he makes conversation.

With time and space in play, there are more possibilities. Apsu grows into new dimensions. He's still the same kind of infinite, falling far, far short of Tiamat, but he's more subtle now. A little more dexterous, and a little more perceptive. So, in his explorations, he notices some things that it is only now possible for him to have noticed.

He observes: "You have more than one mouth."

"That...ngh!...is obvious", she manages.

"I would guess you have an uncountable infinity of mouths. I haven't found all of them."

"Mm."

Now he could ask: "Do you want to find out how I feel in another point of ingress?"

"Yes."

There's only one way Apsu can go from there, so it's a good thing he didn't necessarily ask that question, right then.

Apsu is delicious.

Thor and Sif, verse 6

Every step of Loki's plan has worked exactly as he envisioned.

Thor now knows that Sif has been unfaithful.

At first he tried everything he could think of to convince himself it wasn't so, but to do that he would need Sif to lie to him, and that's something she'll never do. Then he vowed vengeance against the man who would dare sully his wife, because to him Sif is blameless, whereas Sif knows that, in fact, she's the worst person in the world. The terrible thing is that she still loves Vali—not the way she loves Thor, but she does love Vali—and if she knew where he was, she would help him hide. Mercifully, he somehow found a way to spare her the additional guilt, though she beats herself up anyway for the fact she knows she'd work against her husband if she could.

In his search for Vali, Thor upturns the world and shakes it vigorously. His fury knows no bounds! Yet even Thor must one day give up hope. He cannot find Vali; as far as he can tell, Vali never existed. Even if he did, his vengeance would be quick and hollow. Vali's victory over him is complete and everlasting.

Thor becomes a shambling husk of a man. He doesn't speak. He doesn't perform heroic feats. He doesn't leave his house. There is no light left in his once-brilliant blue eyes.

Every step of Loki's plan has worked exactly as he envisioned, right up to the moment that, instead of leaving her husband to rot in defeated solitude, she takes care of him.

Loki watches the two of them, a fly on the wall.

She makes him meals. He eats mechanically.

She takes him for walks, holding his hand as he shuffles along.

She tucks him into bed each evening, and kisses his cheek. He stares at the ceiling for most of the night.

Blast. Blast. Blast!

Curses and blast!

Loki confronts Sif. The wording is exactly appropriate!

"Why do you still care for him?"

"He's my husband. I'm his wife. I love him."

"How can you possibly still love him? Look at him." Loki reaches up to Thor's massive shoulder and shakes him. He nearly topples over, unresisting.

"He's not as...active...lately."

"He's going to be like this forever, you know."

"Then that is how long I will care for him."

"You've really broken him. Is that it? Is it guilt that keeps you chained to this

oaf of an iron ball?”

“It’s love.” And it really is. Sif’s guilt only makes her feel powerless. It’s love that gives her strength.

“Good grief, woman. This is perverse. Perhaps you LIKE him this way.”

Loki’s teeth are knocked out and he’s on the floor before he knows what hit him.

It was Mjolnir, the hammer that can break a god, or, when wielded by one who is not a skilled warrior, at least a god’s teeth. The closest thing to hand when, for the first time in her life, Sif lost her temper.

The hammer drops to her side with a bang. Her hands are shaking. She looks to her husband, sitting in his chair. He looks faintly impressed.

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 6

Hermes is everything Aphrodite hoped for, and more. He STUDIES her. She is his new frontier of science, and he tackles her open questions with relentlessness and aplomb.

“Oh, I have an open question for you.”

“What?”

She turns her back to him and points a thumb at her ass.

So that’s fun.

Still: all good things come to an end, and even wordplay with the straightest of all straight men (“You’re DEFINITELY straight”) can get old. Hermes is a little one-dimensional, and Aphrodite can feel the telltale unscratched itch that reminds her there’s more to life than this. Then Hermes surprises her.

“You know, it would be nice if I could see you love someone else.”

Her eyebrows come dangerously close to shooting right off of her head.

“Sample size, and all”, he explains.

“I want to sample YOUR size!”

Aphrodite has had her fair share of polyamorous relationships. Somebody gets the funny idea that a threesome would be nice, and then deep feelings develop for the added participant. Or any of dozens of other paths to non-binary love. That’s not new. The new thing here is that Hermes is being literal: he wants to see Aphrodite LOVE someone else, as much as she loves him. More, for all he cares. Just for its own sake. He’s curious. What will be the common elements between her love with him and her love with someone else? What will be the differences? Science demands answers to even the silliest of questions.

Jealousy? Hah!

Science!

Suddenly Aphrodite is all about the pursuit of knowledge. She racks up dozens of data points in nothing flat.

She asks Hermes: "Are we learning anything?"

Hermes adjusts his spectacles thoughtfully. "Do you care?"

"Nope!"

"Well we've learned that at least. Go forth and conquer, love."

"Right away, commander!"

And oh, how Aphrodite conquers. The body count rises precipitously. She feels like she's a thousand years old again. Hermes' monomaniacal drive rubs off on her ("You know what else you can rub off on me?"), and she becomes, for a time, an unstoppable engine of loneliness destruction. No one is safe.

But all good things must come to an end.

"Hermes, how long do you want me to keep this up? I'm starting to feel like a machine, which isn't my favorite feeling. A love machine, but still."

Hermes quickly writes "love machine" on his idea page, and underlines it twice. Then he says, "Until riiiiiiiiight...now". And explodes.

When the smoke clears, Aphrodite finds herself on a small sailing ship, somewhere over the Great Barrier Reef, on a breathtakingly beautiful day, with a breathtakingly beautiful woman looking out across the water over the bow, her shiny silver hair flowing like mercury in the wind.

Tiamat, verse 6

Time is approximately four hundred million years old, and Tiamat is enormously, improbably, grotesquely pregnant.

It's starting to show.

"Hmmm."

"Mm?"

"Hmmmmm."

Apsu walks around the awesome bulk of her, getting a sense of the situation. (Or, possibly, shrugs and allows himself to do what comes naturally for him.)

"How do you feel?"

Tiamat swallows so she can speak clearly. "Good."

“Do you know what this is?”, he asks, prodding the vastness of primal chaos.

“My belly.”

“It seems to have something in it, other than me. I can feel it moving around in there.”

“Mm.”

“I am going to squeeze you now, Tiamat.”

“Okay.”

Tiamat arranges herself to be easily squozen.

Apsu doesn't squeeze her yet. “I am going to make an unusual request.”

“Okay.”

“Please do not swallow me while I squeeze you.”

Tiamat nods. Apsu squeezes. Tiamat swallows him.

“Tiamat.”

“Yes?”

“Are you able to not swallow me?”

“Yes.”

“Will you demonstrate this ability if I attempt again to squeeze you?”

“I may.”

She doesn't.

Tiamat is not stupid.

She knows exactly what Apsu is trying to do, because he wouldn't be trying to do it if it weren't what she wanted. Tiamat effectively has complete control over reality simply through her wishes. Apsu is smart enough to anticipate what she wants, except when she wants something truly unusual, which sometimes happens. Even then, all she has to do is let him know. It normally feels to her like she has all the choice, and Apsu has all the power. It isn't true; Tiamat has both. But it doesn't feel that way.

It seems like Apsu is always thwarting her. His life is perfect; hers isn't. All he has to do is what comes naturally for him. Tiamat has the burden of free will. She has to decide what she wants, and when she wants something she can't have, Apsu is the one who tells her so. She doesn't blame him—blame is yet to be invented—but she doesn't like it. He never has to experience anything like that. Apsu gets everything he wants, because all he wants is to satisfy the subset of Tiamat's desires which are possible to satisfy, and he is flawlessly good at doing that.

This is a novel circumstance, in that Tiamat can thwart Apsu without thwarting herself. Novelty is enjoyable. She's in no hurry. She does want to know what this new development inside her is, but she can wait a few more hundred million years to find out. Let Apsu figure out a way to give her what she wants without her cooperation. Let him be the frustrated one for a change. She's enjoying herself immensely in the meantime. (And growing ever more titanically pregnant, with each of his failed attempts.)

Apsu tries to survive squeezing Tiamat a few more times, without success, before he begins to try strategies more sophisticated than 'you promise? really? okay'.

He smiles to himself.

Thor and Sif, verse 7

Sif sits on her bed. Mjolnir lies in front of her. Thor is probably where she left him, at the banquet table he polished for a hundred days with wax from an immortal serpent. (And Loki excused himself from the premises hours ago.)

She could, of course, live like this for the rest of eternity, with her husband a high-functioning corpse. It wouldn't be a happy life, but it would be a life with love—Thor would be fine, if he didn't love Sif so much—and that's all she needs.

Is that all she wants?

All she could ask for?

Sif stares at the hammer. She purses her lips.

What would Thor do?

Loki's wife, Sigyn, is the most powerful sorceress in the world. She isn't any more of a warrior than Sif is, but, due to her magic alone, she's a match for anyone and anything short of Thor. Sif knows this because she is also slightly unhinged and uninhibitedly evil, so Thor has had to stop her from destroying the world a couple times.

Sif invites her over for dinner.

They talk about their husbands.

"Oh, Loki is terrible in bed. He invents some ridiculous new position that doesn't do anything for anyone, then he pretends to have an orgasm and gloats."

Sif covers her mouth to stifle a giggle, blushing fiercely.

"Anyway, let's talk about you."

"Me?"

Sigyn points a very long fingernail at her, which wavers. She is ingloriously

tipsy. “You.”

Sif sits bolt straight.

“You”, Sigyn says, “are up to something.”

“N-no I’m not?”

“Yes you are. I know a scheme when I see one. I got SOMETHING out of my marriage.”

Sif turns her eyes down. Left, right. Everywhere except toward Sigyn. She mumbles something.

“Louder.”

Mumble.

“Pardon me? You’re running a test?”

“I-I’m. Going on a quest.”

“Quests are foolish.” Sigyn waves one hand dismissively, and takes another sip of wine with the other. “You should destroy the world.”

“I like the world.”

“So?”

Sif sets her jaw. “I’m going on a quest. To fix it. What I did. Somehow.” Sif gets up from her chair and kneels next to Sigyn. “I beg you, great sorceress: will you please help me?”

“Ugh. Get up.”

Sif stands up.

“I’ll teach you a few spells if you let me watch you in my divining pool. It will be funny to see you get eaten by a troll as soon as you step outside the comfortable little nest that meathead built for you.”

Sif gulps. “I agree.”

“Sweet little bird. Let’s see if you’re ready to fly.”

Black lightning shoots out from Sigyn’s eyes, and, for Sif at least, the world goes away.

Eros and Psyche, verse 7

Aphrodite pads over to the woman with the silver hair, and greets her: “Hermes.”

She looks up, smiling like she’s with an old friend. “Aphrodite. Call me Psyche, please.”

“Psyche. There’s something I’ve been wondering.”

“Wonder is a wondrous state of mind to be in.” Her gaze wanders back to the ocean.

Aphrodite tries to find some innuendo in that. I’d like to be in YOUR...mind. No.

“Your whole change thing. What’s the deal with that?”

“How do you mean?”

“Your body changes, your personality changes. It seems like everything changes. Can I even say you’re still the same person?”

“Are you still the same person you were a few hundred years ago?”

“You know what I mean. Plus, you change a lot faster than that.”

“No, I’m not the same person. I remember all my past lives, but none of them are ‘me’, the way you mean.”

“So the man I loved is dead, basically.”

Psyche makes a moue. “Depends. Do you mean he’s dead, or do you mean he died?”

Aphrodite blinks. “What’s the difference?”

“They’re opposites. Death as a state is stasis, but death as an event is transformation. The man you loved experienced the second kind of death, and now I’m me, but I’m still alive.”

Psyche smiles.

Aphrodite opens and closes her mouth. It occurs to her: she just had a deep, thoughtful conversation with Hermes. Psyche. Whatever.

“New question. Are you still attracted to women?”

Psyche shrugs sanguinely. “As you prefer.”

Eros puts an arm around her shoulder. Psyche pulls close.

Tiamat, verse 7

Apsu nearly has it.

It didn’t take him hundreds of thousands of years. Hundreds, yes; thousands, no. It is a complex operation, but Apsu is good with complexity. He has to be. Tiamat is to the set of all possible worlds what the Mandelbrot set is to a dotted line.

There is something new inside Tiamat, and Apsu’s aim is to push it out of her,

but as soon as he gets close enough she engulfs and digests him.

Difficult parameters to work within, but not impossible.

Apsu undertakes a cartography of Tiamat's interior.

A complete map IS impossible, even given infinite time to work with, which is exactly how much he has, but he doesn't need anywhere near a complete map. All he has to know is which tubes to go down to take him near one of Tiamat's wombs. If he could go in, look around, and come out again, this would be easy, but with Tiamat only one direction is possible. Apsu may enter; he may not leave.

He also cannot directly observe or interact with his other possible selves. That would also make things easy. He could devise a system of signals to communicate to himself which passages he's sucked through, in that case. Alas: this he cannot do. What he CAN do is observe the effects he has on Tiamat, and particularly the roiling, uneven impressions made by the whatever-it-is inside her colossally distended abdomen. It is a challenge, since the change compared to her original figure is infinitesimal, but it can be done. Apsu is adept at doing things that can be done.

When Tiamat swallows him, he pays careful attention to his surroundings, feeling for the presence of foreign bodies. When one is near, if he has the physical mobility to do so, he gives it a kick. They are all already kicking at random intervals all the time, of course, but that only makes his signal a noisy one. It is still a signal, and with enough patience and attention to detail, he can work it out. Apsu has more than enough of both. Hence, it only takes him a few hundred years.

Tiamat experiences a sublime sensation as Apsu winds through four different paths in her digestive tracts, comes together near one point, and presses from several angles at once with enough combined force to eject a titan from her body.

A titan, omnipotent creator-destroyer of worlds, precursor of the gods. It looks out on the cosmos through all-seeing eyes, and it flexes its myriad arms, testingly. Great fiery wheels-within-wheels ignite at its back, in preparation. Then Tiamat absent-mindedly scoops it up, pops it into her mouth, chews, and swallows.

"Ah", says Apsu.

"Mm?"

"That was our first-born child."

"Mm."

"How did it taste?"

"Good. Not great."

“Would you like to have another?”

“Yes.”

A few hundred years later, Gaia is born, and Tiamat decides not to eat her just then. A few hundred years after that, Ouranos follows.

Gaia and Ouranos

Gaia and Ouranos are old titans. Their love is a little like that of their parents, in its primal directness, but not quite so hostile to life. It comes close.

Ouranos pummels Gaia with asteroids, scours her with storms, bathes her in radiation, crushes her with unrelenting gravitational force. She is in exquisite agony.

They love every second they have with each other. Billions of years pass in sadomasochistic bliss. They have countless siblings too far removed in space and time to care about. Hot lava gushes from Gaia in explosive bursts. Their children are born from the aggravated knots and scars of her flesh: Pontus, Typhon, Cronus, Rhea.

Gaia's father reaches down to pluck Pontus and Typhon away, and they are never seen nor heard from again. But Cronus and Rhea live.

Cronus and Rhea

Cronus and Rhea are young titans.

Their love is almost human.

Cronus is a domineering monster with a will to power unlike anything the world has ever known. He castrates his father, because he can. Rhea checks her feelings on the matter, and decides that, yes, that is indeed the sexiest thing she's ever seen.

(Their mother's role in the matter will go unmentioned. Gaia and Ouranos are consenting adults, and what they do to each other is none of our business.)

When the two of them have kids, Cronus does the thing you do when you're the most powerful being alive, and swallows them, leaving not a single one to live and grow. But Cronus is not the most powerful being alive, and can't digest gods. He gives himself a stomach ache, and lies around complaining about it. Rhea isn't impressed. Maybe one of her children will be stronger than this punk, she thinks. So she hides one.

She's right. Little Zeus guts him. Gods fall out.

Zeus

Zeus is an old god, and he doesn't love much at all, but he really likes boning. He collects a harem. Then, he sleeps around. He couldn't tell you Aphrodite's name if you gave him the first three syllables. You gotta narrow it down more. He's a busy guy.

There is a proliferation of gods, in the ages following, and Zeus has a lot to do with it.

Sometimes one of them disappears, never to be seen nor heard from again.

Verse 8

Time and Space are not well defined.

You can't even fully distinguish them from each other. They're conjoined twins. Spacetime.

The titans and the gods are immense enough to bend the rules. They live non-linear lives. Thor and Sif were known a thousand years ago, and Aphrodite and Hermes, two thousand; but that has little to do with the age they experience themselves as, and less still with when they were born. As for Apsu, spacetime is his plaything, and Tiamat, well.

She doesn't even fit.

Sif and Thor, verse 8

When Sif regains consciousness, she doesn't know where she is, but more importantly: she doesn't know where Thor is.

"Thor!", she cries, before she's even looked around.

"He's in your pocket, you mewling wimp."

Sigyn's voice is a distorted rasp that seems to come from every direction.

"Sigyn?" Sif checks the pocket of her dress.

"Other pocket."

In the other pocket, there's a locket. Inside the locket, there's a gem. There's a tiny Thor there in the gem, frozen as though trapped in amber, which may well be the substance of it. He still looks faintly impressed.

"What have you done to him?!"

"Whatever I felt like, since his will was so far gone he was pretty much an inanimate object. I gave him a nudge the rest of the way there. He'll be fine. As-

suming you learn the spell to free him, which is a big assumption.”

Sif clutches the locket to her chest. She’s in a forest. It’s dark.

“First lesson, my little fledgling dove. The only power you were born with is one that makes you a great nurturer, which is pathetic, and especially useless if you’re being attacked by wolves—”

Sif notices the wolves.

“—so you’re going to learn to shoot plasma balls from your nose.”

“P-plasma?”

“Plasma kicks more ass than fire.”

“...my nose?”

“Don’t question teacher.”

This was a bad idea.

The wolves attack. Sif runs. Sigyn is incorrect: being a great nurturer is a very useful ability when you’re being chased by wolves in your third trimester of pregnancy. She isn’t slowed down at all, and her baby just thinks this is a fun exciting ride, a welcome change of pace from her usual docile lifestyle.

“First”, Sigyn says, “clear your mind of distraction and worry. You are in control.”

“EEEEEEEE”

“Once your mind is as a crystal, focus your will and gather your power. Now: shoot plasma from your nose!”

Sif turns around. She breathes. The wolves are coming right for her. She focuses her will. She gathers her power. With a dainty honk, she blows a ball of snot partially out of her nose.

The wolves leap at her—she screams, falls to the ground—and are struck out of the air by black lightning.

“You clearly have no aptitude for spellcraft. At all. Here, take this.”

A gnarled staff topped with a fat sapphire falls on the ground mere inches from Sif’s face. She looks up. There’s some large, dark bird flying away.

“A t-tool to help me concentrate?”

She sits up, tired muscles protesting.

“A damn stick you can whack things with. I stuck a shiny rock on it for looks so you won’t die of embarrassment, you precious thing. Pick it up and get going with your quest before I get bored and make you dance.”

“What about learning spells?!”

“Eh.”

This was a very bad idea.

Eros and Psyche, verse 8

Psyche is thoughtful and deep and as far from pretentiousness as Hermes was from humility.

“I’m going to call you Eros.”

“I don’t mind, but what does it matter? A rose by any other name...”

“I like names. They mean something to me.” She shrugs a shoulder. “I know it’s silly.”

“Well, so long as you know.”

Eros is the same person as Aphrodite; what differences there are, are only cosmetic. So all the differences in the relationship between Eros and Psyche are differences in Psyche, and the differences are extreme. For the first time in a long time, Eros feels out of control. He’s accustomed to being the active agent in a relationship, the one that moves things along and takes things to the next level, a great smooth arc towards climax, then gently drifting down to the warmth and comfort of familiarity, and finally bittersweet separation. The arc of his relationship with Psyche, though, is utterly unlike that. He doesn’t feel like he’s ascending toward anything at all. He feels like he’s in freefall with her, and he doesn’t know which way is up.

“I asked the former you if he was learning anything, once, when he was trying to figure love out like it was some complicated thing with moving parts and orderly laws. I thought there was no way he could have been; it was just Hermes being Hermes, always in search of what’s right in front of his nose. Now I’m not sure. I think maybe you learned a lot.”

Psyche wobbles her hand in front of her uncertainly. “It’s less that I learned anything, and more that I unlearned something.”

“Must have been a big something.”

“Maybe. I just had to let go of the idea that love was...a substance. Something that could be created and isolated. I was thinking of it like a chemical, but that’s not it at all. It isn’t made of anything. It’s more like a force. A force only exists in the relationship between particular things, it isn’t anything in particular itself. I don’t know. I still don’t have it right, but maybe now I’m wrong more subtly.”

Eros thinks about that. He isn’t sure she’s wrong at all.

They sail the world, never setting foot on land. Eros’s mastery of enchantment

keeps the weather from being too unkind to them, and, by some trick of Psyche's, the ship never runs low on supplies or needs repair. It just keeps building character in little ways, a dent here, a chip there, but over time it only ever seems to become more seaworthy. At some point it starts feeling wrong to call it "the ship"—it's too impersonal. Eros starts to have actual feelings of affection towards the thing.

"Psyche, what's happening to me? I think I love this ship. I would be heartbroken if it ever died. It isn't even alive."

"Who says it isn't alive?"

"Uh. Science?", Eros tries.

"It's changing. It's not the same ship it was at the beginning; it's progressing through a story, a story that touches on the stories of others, and that story hasn't ended yet. That's life, if you ask me."

Eros thinks about that too.

It takes him a while, but he begins to get comfortable with the idea that the ship is as much a living thing as he is. It doesn't have a mind, but, as far as Eros knows, neither does a tree. Not a mind he would recognize as one, anyway. Who's to say the ship doesn't have a mind like that? The creaking of its boards begins to sound like idle thoughts to him. Nothing consequential, but not without meaning, either. Now Eros definitely feels like the ship should have a name; he has to admit Psyche was right, all along. She wasn't being silly at all. Names matter.

Psyche suggests that Eros should be the one to name the ship, but he comes up blank.

"That's okay. Something will come to you."

Hermes made life fun, for a while. He was intense and sincere and totally ridiculous. Now, though: Psyche would be impossible to ridicule. She doesn't make life more fun, exactly, but life is already fun enough for Eros. She does make life more meaningful, and that's exactly what he feels like he needs right now. They're together on the ship for a long time before it occurs to him that they haven't done anything more sexual than cuddling.

He didn't notice.

He's been too invested in just listening to what she has to say, in that hypnotic, bell-like voice she has now. Even when she's quiet, he finds himself just watching her expression as she stares off into space, lost in thought. She moves slowly, she even speaks slowly, but her mind is blazing fast and constantly in motion. When he asks her a question, just to hear her speak, he's consistently amazed. It's as though she'd been thinking about that question for her entire life up to that point, but she answers quite casually, perfectly at ease, without any trace of the anxiety to be understood she used to have as Hermes. He sus-

pects she would be equally comfortable not speaking at all, just enjoying his company for days on end, in complete silence but for the soft noises of the wind and the sea.

Eros surprises even himself with how deeply he loves her.

Tiamat, verse 8

The spawn of Tiamat fill the cosmos. They spread and multiply of their own accord. It soon seems pointless for Apsu to waste effort pressing more children out of Tiamat one by one, when their population is already exploding exponentially, so he redirects himself.

Tiamat regards her descendants neutrally, her expression unreadable.

Apsu asks her: “What do you think of them?”

“Mm.”

Tiamat considers.

A star dies.

“I think I like them.”

“How do you like them?”

“I like them generally.”

“Do you like how they live and grow?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like how they interact with each other?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like how they taste?”

“Yes.”

Apsu has countless possibilities of action.

Verse 9

Sif’s ancestry can be traced through myriad gods, all the way back to the titans, and, finally, to Tiamat. Aphrodite and Hermes—or Eros and Psyche, if you prefer—are her cousins, if you go back far enough. She’s one tiny twig growing from a very big family tree, about to sprout a leaf of her own.

Assuming a distant relative doesn’t kill her, first.

Sif and Thor, verse 9

Trusting Sigyn to guide her quest is obviously a stupid thing to do, but the choice is already made. There isn't much Sif can do now but follow her suggestions.

(A less kind person would say, "bend to her demands".)

After all, she isn't all bad. She did save Sif from being ravaged by wolves. Several times by now, in fact. She has no idea where they're all coming from.

She even follows through on her promise to teach Sif her magic.

"Your next task is to bury those gnomes up to their necks so they'll grow into gnome-trees in the spring. Cycle of life."

"O-okay." Sif doesn't question how gnome-trees will help her marital problems, or whether they are a real thing. "What gnomes?"

"Those gnomes, in those gnome burrows over there."

"Gnome burrows?"

"Right over—BLAST! I forgot you don't know how to see elementals. Ugh. What a piece of work you are. Here's what you do: under that rock, there's a box. Dig it out. Inside you'll find a candle, matchsticks, a full waterskin, and a tin cup. Light the candle, put a pinch of earth and a splash of water in the cup, and hold the cup over the candle. Then, repeat this incantation..."

Sif does these things. Why there would be such a box with such items in it under a rock in the middle of hilly nowhere, Sif does not know, nor does she know how Sigyn could know, but she does, and there is. A few seconds into the incantation, Sigyn interrupts her:

"WITHOUT stuttering. Can you not even speak without obviously demonstrating your abject inferiority? Goodness gracious. Fuck."

Sif winces. She breathes. "Okay. Please start again. I don't know any of those words."

It takes her a few tries, but she gets it right before Sigyn loses patience entirely. Smoke begins to rise from the muddy water, and Sigyn orders her to inhale it, so she does. It burns her throat; she coughs, and Sigyn calls her a baby.

"What an ordeal. Now, can you see those gnomes?"

Sif looks, and sees exactly what she did before. "N-", she begins to say, then her vision changes to fit her intention, and she sees a group of gnomes, only a foot tall, playing a card game with a flat stone for a table and gems for stakes.

"Yes. I think so. Do gnomes look like fat little men?"

"Sometimes. Good. Now, GET them. Get those gnomes!"

Sif doesn't waste time thinking about it, and runs straight for the gnomes with her staff raised. They look at her, confused. Then they realize: she can see them! Crap! They scatter for their burrows, but their slow reaction hurts them, and their stubby legs don't help either. Sif manages to get one gnome, bopping him on the head with her staff to knock him out cold. The rest flee to safety underground. The feeling of victory is exhilarating, but, surprisingly, familiar: it's the same as the feeling of Thor sweeping her up in his arms. Just lonelier. Her heart threatens to break, but she holds it together, hand on her locket.

"One measly gnome. Better than nothing. Stuff it into the ground. You can make a hole with the shovel on that hill."

Just as Sif is finishing burying him up to his neck, the gnome wakes up, dazed, then alarmed. He struggles, but it's no use. He's stuck. "Oh! Oh oh! This is trouble! I'm in it now!"

Sif says, "I'm sorry. But you'll be a tree?"

"A tree? What? Listen: free me, and I'll give you a gem. Eh?"

"Don't listen to that dirty gnome, it's just a dirty old gnome covered in dirt. Gnome gems are worthless. Be on your way. To the east, my quavering questant."

Sif starts to walk away, but the gnome yells after her: "A spell! I'll grant you a spell!"

She turns back. "A spell?"

"A spell to move earth! Just set me free, and my power is yours!"

Sif is pulling the gnome up like a turnip before she has a chance to consider Sigyn's reaction, but, fortunately, it's only: "Well, that was a waste of time. Look at it go, squirming into the ground like a worm. Disgusting. I hope it's eaten by a mole. Now, if you're finished flailing your limbs pointlessly, EAST."

Sif travels east.

Just to check, she gestures at a stone, and it rolls where she means it to.

Sometimes she wonders if she can still see gnomes, and her vision changes; she sees them, as well as other things.

Sif knows two spells.

Eros and Psyche, verse 9

It comes about that Psyche mentions: "I was a man in all of my past lives."

Eros's eyebrows go up. "You've NEVER been a woman before? The god of change never once changed gender until now?"

“Not even once.”

“Wow. Oh, wow! So this is all new for you. How does it feel? Enjoying the feminine side of life?”

“It feels about the same.”

The answer is so unexpected, Eros takes it like a kick to the crotch. “The same?!”

Psyche wobbles her hand. More or less.

This is so drastically at odds with Eros’s long and intimate experience with the subject that he can’t even articulate a response, even in his own mind, for some time. He opens and closes his mouth, eyes wide. The same? It’s totally different. He has immediate, personal, intimate knowledge of the many differences. It’s black and white. Eros was convinced Psyche must be the most insightful person he’d ever met, and now she’s telling him the reality of his sense perceptions is flatly false.

“I don’t know what to even say to that.”

Psyche shrugs. “You care about gender more than I do.”

Now Eros is outright affronted. “Seriously? How can you say that after everything—and everyone—you’ve seen me do? Psyche, let me say it plainly: I give no damn. Love is love.”

“You wouldn’t say every love is the same, though.”

“Well no, of course not. Otherwise there would be no reason for more love, and what a nightmare world that would be.”

“Every love is different from every other love. Gender is just one more difference.”

“The only part of that I object to is the word ‘just’. It’s a BIG, important difference. Maybe the biggest.”

Psyche simply shakes her head.

Eros laughs helplessly. “You’re so sure! Who’s the expert here, anyway?”

“When it comes to arbitrary social constructs, me, and gender is nothing but that.”

Eros cups Psyche’s breast. She looks down at his hand, then back to his face, which is smug. Calmly, Psyche cups Eros’s breast as well.

Without saying anything, her message is clear: you are topless, I am not, and that’s the only real difference here.

“Oh, come now.”

“Maybe later.”

It takes Eros a second.

Holy shit.

She finally got him back.

One thing follows from another, then.

Tiamat, verse 9

Tiamat enjoys kissing more the more kissing she does. She has been kissing Apsu for billions of years.

This, still, is an allegory.

Tiamat is outside time and space.

Even “kissing” is just a name. It is a specific interaction between a specific orientation of Apsu and a specific opening into Tiamat. Apsu has many orientations; Tiamat has many openings. There are many possible interactions. Apsu is a combinatorial explosion of possibilities, and, impossibly, each feels better to Tiamat than all the rest. If Tiamat has many mouths, she also has many throats, leading inside many organs, in many endless labyrinths which rarely connect to each other; and every surface of her, inside or out, to one degree or another, is sensitive to the touch of Apsu. Every interaction, in every orientation, is as full and complex as kissing is; and each has limitless room for subtle variation. Each is an infinite reality unto itself, and ever more are found.

She’s enjoying herself very much. She thinks: she’ll have to stop, eventually. Otherwise, there will be nothing left of him. But: a few more billions of years will be good.

The greater Tiamat’s satisfaction, the greater her hunger.

She wants more.

So, she will have more.

The numberless strands of Apsu thread throughout the cosmos. He could be anywhere, is everywhere. Suffusing all of creation is a passive action for him, as automatic as breathing—not that he could do either, without Tiamat desiring him to.

Giving personal attention to every individual thing in spacetime is easy. Apsu is used to giving personal attention to Tiamat, and this on top of that is no more effort at all. He’s outside time and space as well, with Tiamat, within Tiamat, always, forever. The only tricky part here is that there’s no sense in him controlling the outcome of every event; when infinity is involved, quantitative differences are no difference at all. The activity of the universe needs to be qualitatively different from the action of Apsu. Otherwise, it will be redundant with all the unspeakable things he’s already always doing forever.

For a time, Apsu only observes.

Verse 10

Mortals die. It's what they do; it's unavoidable.

Demigods don't die, unless someone goes out of their way to kill them.

Gods and titans may be killed as well, but there is no way to destroy them so completely that they can never return to life, save one.

Sif and Thor, verse 10

Sif knows two spells. She is the least powerful sorceress in the world.

She's on a quest for redemption, although she still doesn't see how redemption is possible. Her progress is completely random. Only Sigyn's relentless goading drives her forward from one meaningless task to another. Occasionally she learns a new spell or acquires a magical item, at Sigyn's convenience, or by sheer lucky opportunity. Still: she's more effective than she was when her quest began. If she knew what to do, she might even be able to do it.

Probably not.

But maybe!

So one day she gets up the nerve to ask: "Sigyn, um..."

Almost-ask.

"Mother, give me the strength to listen to this wretch without crushing her beneath my heel like the insect she is. Yes, dear, sweet Sif?"

"...i-it's...just that...I don't know what I'm doing?"

"That is apparent."

"And I was thinking, maybe I should?"

"Should you now?"

Sif is uncertain. But: "Then I could figure out what to do myself, and you wouldn't have to tell me what to do all the time?"

"Hmm. That does sound nice. Unfortunately, you never told me what your petty quest was even for, so there's nothing for it. We'll just have to keep on as we were and hope we succeed by accident, which I'm sure is your usual strategy in any case."

"W-what?!"

"What?"

“You don’t know what my quest is for?”

“Probably nothing important.”

Suddenly Sif screams, only just coherently, “THE MOST important!”

“Oho! She has a spine, after all! Don’t strain yourself, now, that’s a new muscle for you!”

This woman! That’s right: she’s evil and insane! Why would Sif ever do what she said? Just because she’s powerful and confident? What a joke! What a blunder! Thor would never have done any of those silly things! He’d have laughed in Sigyn’s face, completed his quest at once, and been home well in time to keep her company while she makes supper!

What would Thor do now?

Sif draws herself to her full height, trembling, nearly five and one-fifth feet. She steels herself, and declares in a voice—not a strong voice, but, well, it’s a voice, not a squeak: “I quest to redeem myself, heal my marriage, and make right what has gone wrong! Nothing will keep me from this purpose. Help me and you will have my gratitude; stand in my way, and I will drive you aside!”

The fact that she’s paraphrasing something she once heard her husband say does not detract from her feeling of empowerment; rather, Sif being Sif, it enhances it.

“Well now, you mean business, don’t you? I’d better not oppose you. Redemption, hm? And here I thought the wife of Thor was pure as snow. I wonder what it is you did to deserve my torment?”

All of Sif’s bluster evaporates instantly. Sigyn did not need to cast a spell to achieve that effect.

Quietly, but without any quavering, Sif says a thing she’s never said out loud before: “I was unfaithful.”

Eros and Psyche, verse 10

Eros and Psyche make love for the first time, and it is slow, slow, slow. Eros catches himself hoping it’ll last forever.

Yet: after several hours, he finds, with mixed feelings, that he can no longer delay initiating the process of disrobing.

He ends a very long kiss.

Softly: “Miss Magician.”

Dreamily: “Mm hm.”

“I notice you have nothing up your sleeve.”

“I haven’t.”

“Would you like to?”

Psyche smiles. “It’s as though you read my mind.”

Off comes the blouse, first. Psyche’s figure is willowy to the point of ethereal. It’s surprising she hasn’t simply wafted away on the gentle ocean breeze, in all this time.

Also surprising: beneath Psyche’s skirt, there is a penis.

Now that he actually looks at her naked body, it’s clear that she is biologically male. There are subtle hints as well as obvious. He could have noticed in the first moment he saw her.

Eros stares.

The side of his mouth rises into a smirk.

He positions his head as originally intended. Nothing, after all, has changed. Her point is taken.

Tiamat, verse 10

Tiamat gives birth to titans. Titans give birth to titans and gods. Gods give birth to gods, demigods, and mortals.

Demigods and mortals are not otherwise of interest.

There is a pattern: at each step something is lost, and something else is gained. The biggest step is the first one, and each successive step is smaller. There is an asymptote at zero: Tiamat.

What’s lost is obvious. What is gained? There must be something, else the descendants of Tiamat would be continuous with Tiamat herself. They aren’t: they are something else.

At the beginning of Apsu’s investigation, he is inexperienced, and gathers information in the only way he knows. He chooses, at random, a titan that has reigned in absolute sovereignty over its world for several astronomical aeons. He picks it up by the armpits like an unruly toddler, which is a startling experience for a titan.

He brings it outside time and space.

“This is one of our children.”

“Mm.”

He puts it down at its mother’s feet.

It tries, in vain, to get a sense of what it’s looking at.

The scale of titans is planets and stars. A truly big titan, like this one, holds

domain over a galaxy. There are many galaxies. There are no supergalactic titans. Not only are Tiamat's children not infinite in their scope: they are not even very large.

Tiamat considers the creature before her.

She picks it up curiously. It struggles, lashing out with powers sufficient to tear time and space asunder—but time and space are not near at hand. It would have been a great idea, to do that while Apsu held it; Apsu wouldn't survive such a cataclysmic onslaught for so long as a moment, but all it does to Tiamat is activate her habitual response to being teased.

Somewhere, a galaxy is disintegrating, scattering stars in every direction. The universe as a whole is virtually unchanged.

The titan screams, and is never seen nor heard from again.

“What did you think of it?”

Tiamat considers further.

She likes her descendants. It's more of a feeling than a thought. She feels differently towards them than she does towards Apsu, or towards herself. She has no particular opinion about herself. Apsu is delicious; she knows exactly what she feels about him, and how to act on that feeling. It is clear, unidirectional. Her feelings about her descendants are more...omnidirectional. She doesn't want anything specific, when it comes to them, but that isn't the same as indifference.

She likes them; they make her feel good.

They're living out their tiny lives in time and space, and she likes that. She likes seeing it, thinking about it, knowing it's happening; everything about it. Everything about them. There are more of them in her belly, unborn, and she likes that too. She can feel them in there, wriggling and kicking. It doesn't feel like much of anything, but, now that she knows what they are, she likes the feeling, reminding her they're there. She has no preference when it comes to whether they should be born or not. She'd like either eventuality. The ones inside her will always vastly outnumber the ones that have been born, anyway, even if Apsu resumed delivering them, and even though he's good enough at it now to deliver one every millionth of a second or so.

She doesn't ENJOY them, or, at least, not in the same way she enjoys Apsu. She likes them. They're fine.

“It was fine.”

“Do you want me to bring you more?”

“Yes.”

Verse 11

Apsu offers possibilities where there were none. Tiamat's desires dictate which possibilities come to pass, whether through her own action, or through Apsu—it makes no difference. These are their functions.

Apsu offers: "You may have anything."

Tiamat desires: everything.

So everything comes to pass.

Sif and Thor, verse 11

Sigyn laughs and laughs.

Sif, the very image of the ideal bride, has been unfaithful. It's too much to bear. Sigyn can't stand it. It's the greatest prank ever played. If someone had done this on purpose, she would murder her husband on the spot and marry him instead.

She does not allow Sif to hear her laughing. Sif is left in silence with her misery for a time, and the look on her face only makes Sigyn laugh harder.

Eventually she masters herself. She has to say something. There are too many choices; thinking them over gets her cackling and snorting all over again.

Eventually: "Huh. What a slut!"

All of Sif's grief turns to white hot rage in a flash, and she tries to say, "YOU'RE a slut!", but it just comes out as screaming.

"Now now. Shhh. It's all right, sweet child. Now that I know the object of your quest, your path is obvious to me. The highest mountain in the world lies to the north. Near its peak, there is a spring of fresh water. Bathe in it, and you will be pure once more."

Sif thinks: this is probably a trick. But: that's the first task Sigyn has given her that actually sounds related to her quest in some way.

Sif breathes. She sets her jaw. She knows a spell to make vows binding.

"Great sorceress Sigyn. I dearly wish to trust your words are true. If I bathe in the spring you speak of, will my quest be at an end?"

"That is what I just said, yes."

"Do you give your word?"

Sigyn knows this spell. If she gives her word and what she's said isn't true, Sif doesn't have to give her word back. She'll be mute, and, among many other

highly undesirable side effects, Sif will be able to work spells that depend on Sigyn's word. She could bind Sigyn to any oath she wants, as a trivial example. So: she waffles. Then she decides: eh. There's not much that could top that laugh, anyway. She was lying through her teeth, but it's easy enough to make what she's said true.

"I give my word, kind Sif, that if you bathe in the spring of the mountain to the north, which I have named, your quest will be finished then and there."

Cautiously, Sif allows the warm glow of hope to well up in her once more.

"Then I will travel to this mountain!"

"Good girl."

Sif overcomes minor obstacles, such as vengeful gnomes, on the way to the mountain. She knows where she's going, so it feels like progress instead of senseless busywork. She's a real adventurer now! If only Thor could see her.

Well, maybe he can. She hopes so.

She kisses her locket.

The mountain appears on the horizon.

"Now, dear Sif, the difficult part of the journey. It would take you many years to scale this mountain, even were there not dangers without end lurking in its crags and alcoves. Your child will be born here and grow to meet your eyes before you reach your goal. Pray the two of you will serve each other well, and that you will not be separated—or, worse still, turned one against the other by the evil which lives here. Hm, a-hm-hm! Ohohohohoho!...oh."

Sif flies to the peak with the power of a spell she was given by the sylphs.

"I forgot you could do that. Well, phooey. I suppose it will be easy, then."

Eros and Psyche, verse 11

The ultimate trick of Hermes, the first and greatest magician: changing her gender without changing his sex.

Magic has to do with perception.

If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Is reality real of itself, or do we make it real by experiencing it? Psyche's answer: the question is false. Everything is real, but our perception is selective. Magic is the art of changing perceptions: others', and your own.

Once Eros begins to emerge from the fog of afterglow, a couple days later, he thinks about what he's learned. Psyche has really shown him up, on this little sailing adventure of self-discovery. He's been blundering around in a daze the

whole time while she led him along, step by step, with the utmost gentleness and care, all the while letting him think she was as lost and confused as he was. Then she got him to turn face-first into a cream pie of preconceptions he didn't know he had, and all she had to do was tap him on the shoulder.

Psyche is not the first person Eros has encountered whose gender identity does not match her anatomy. That, alone, wouldn't have fazed him. The magic trick is: even after the reveal, he STILL can't think of Psyche as a man.

He can't even think of her as a woman in a man's body.

She's just a woman.

Simple as that.

Psyche is femininity distilled. She's the end result of an alchemical process that stripped away everything not Woman. It's easier for Eros to think of Hermes as 'her' than Psyche as 'him'; she has an aura about her that has to be felt to be believed. She's transcendental, a platonic ideal made real.

He considered himself pretty enlightened before. He might have thought: your gender is different from your sex. No problem. In fact: hot. (Eros would think anything about you is hot, as long as it's true to who you are.) Now it's clear to him that there isn't anyone in the world whose gender is the SAME as their sex. They're in different categories; it's like comparing a number with a color. He still can't separate the concepts entirely in his mind, but now he considers that a feature of his mind rather than a feature of reality. He has sex-gender synaesthesia. Most people do. Most people, but, for all appearances, not Psyche. She doesn't seem confused in the least.

They've been lying in bed together, for a while. Thinking.

"A social construct."

"Mmm?"

"You called gender a social construct, before. What does that mean?"

"It's like race. Racism and sexism are more or less the same idea. Sexism was invented earlier. Racism later, when two social classes wasn't enough."

"Ah..."

Gears turn.

"That's...really ugly."

"It is."

"If genders are social classes, men are the upper class, and women are the lower class."

"Mm hm."

"So: gender equality. I've been trying to make it happen for a long time. You

wouldn't happen to have any insights, would you, you beautiful genius?"

Psyche languidly traces a finger through the air, miming something like making two checkmarks, punctuating: "Not. Possible."

"I don't mean making the genders themselves the same. That'd suck. I'm just talking about equal social status."

Psyche shakes her head to one side, then the other.

Eros furrows his brow. He has a terrible feeling of foreboding, but he has to ask, and a little emotion slips into his voice as he does: "Why not?"

Psyche looks him right in the eyes.

"The feminine class is lower than the masculine class. That's part of the definition. It's intrinsic to the game. That's all gender is: a game of chance, with winners and losers, determined by arbitrary cultural mores that assign gender by biological lottery. You could make the winners into losers, and vice versa, but the only way to make them equal is to stop playing the game, and if you have the concept of gender in your mind at all, even if you know what it really is, you're playing. I'm sorry."

Hearing her make such uncharacteristically firm statements, with such conviction: somehow, it doesn't brook any argument.

"...I liked the game."

"I'm sorry."

"I mean...everything bad that ever happened to a woman, just because she was a woman. Every arbitrary advantage given to a man for being a man. I thought we were taking something beautiful and using it to hurt each other, all just a huge mistake, but this is actually worse. The way you're saying it, the hurting is the point. There's no mistake. It's a design feature. Subordination is what's supposed to happen."

A lump in his throat prevents him from naming any particular example of sexual subordination, though plenty come to mind. Nevertheless, Psyche seems to know what he's thinking. Eros is starting to tear up, believing the theory before he's decided to, watching the implications come into view and slot into perfect congruence with his reality, one by one. She's getting quieter and quieter each time she says:

"I'm sorry."

Eros pushes her hair behind her ear. "It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is."

Tiamat, verse 11

Apsu is trying to be conservative about the influence he has on the universe, because it's very fragile, but he needs to learn about it so he knows what to do with it. So, he removes a small fraction of Tiamat's descendants from time and space, uniformly. He is indiscriminate. If he could be in only one place at once, this process would take him at least eight trillion years—potentially much longer—but the task is embarrassingly parallel. Subjectively, he experiences it as taking about five seconds, which is how long it took him to enter spacetime, hoist up a god, and leave. He only remembers one kidnapping; the rest were other possibilities. Presumably, some of his attempts were unsuccessful, but he can't check for that directly and he sees no value in making the effort to figure it out indirectly.

One way or another, he comes away with just under fifty quintillion individual creatures, selected from all across space and all across time. Some of them seem to recognize him.

Then he feeds them to Tiamat, one by one, and asks her what she thinks of them. He lets her consider her answers for as long as she wants, which can be very long indeed. This part takes literally no time at all.

The results are inconclusive.

She likes them.

That's all.

He spends a while thinking it over. Long after her jaws close around the very last abductee, and after an interval of business as usual, it occurs to him that he may have been going about this the wrong way.

Finally, he asks: "What do you like about them?"

"Everything."

There is a pause.

Apsu says, "I am confused."

It's like all reality turns inside-out, all at once.

Apsu is confused.

Now Tiamat is confused as well, because she was quite certain—QUITE certain—Apsu couldn't be confused. She has no idea what that could mean.

"What does that mean?"

"It means: your desires seem contradictory to me."

Now she knows what it means, but she's still just as confused as before.

"I don't understand why that would confuse you."

“Do you like your descendants?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want them to live full and happy lives for all eternity?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want all of them to live for all eternity, every last one of them?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to eat them?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to eat all of them, so that none are left?”

“Yes.”

“Do you realize they die when you eat them?”

“Yes.”

“Do you realize they are unlike me, in that they cannot subjunctively survive their own death?”

“Yes.”

“I cannot arrange for all of them to live happily forever, and also die painful deaths inside of you.”

“That is obvious.”

“Thus, I am confused.”

“That is still a mystery.”

Verse 12

Sif wafts upward on a gentle breeze. She means to reach the peak of the highest mountain in the world, and she has a spell that makes that easy.

It still takes a few hours.

Monsters gnash and wail below, unable to reach her.

Then the air becomes too thin for monsters, but Sif's spell is the sylph's spell. The air moves as she wills it.

Later it grows cold enough to kill, but Sif caught a salamander too.

Sigyn isn't paying attention. She told Sif a malign influence blocks her magic from afar. She did not mention that the malign influence is boredom; this part of the story doesn't interest her. She'll go back to her divining pool after Sif reaches the spring.

Sif reaches the spring. She puts her dress aside, and eases herself in, holding her

pregnant belly. It's almost, but not quite, hot enough to be uncomfortable. (It's hot enough to kill, but.)

It's incredibly relaxing.

"Aaaah."

Then a creature rises up out of it.

"AAAAAAAH!"

"Hello."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Sif launches out of the water and she's on her feet in moments, fully armored, wielding a fearsome mace that crackles with barely contained power. Magic!

Well, magic items.

She waves the mace around in what she hopes to be a threatening manner.

"Have we met?", asks the thing in the spring. It's risen up entirely now, and stands on the surface of the water, eight feet tall, a very thin figure, wearing finely tailored bleached-white clothes and a finely tailored bleached-white bag on its head.

It's the bag that's the most disturbing part. It seems form-fitting, tapering to describe a chin and neck, but no nose, eye cavities, ears, or any other features. There is no movement corresponding to its speech.

"Name yourself, monster!", Sif calls out, in her increasingly reliable Thor impression.

"Refer to me as you like."

This is potentially a trap. Some spell Sif doesn't know could be involved.

Sif really, really wishes Sigyn could reach her right now.

"...faceless man?"

"Then I am the faceless man. It's a pleasure to meet you, Sif."

"You know my name?"

Sif's guard lowers almost completely, without her noticing. He's not very menacing. He's just a really tall, skinny guy. He sounds nice enough. But: traps!

"I mean: how know you my name, faceless man?"

She squints distrustfully, weapon raised.

"I am a very good guesser."

Eros and Psyche, verse 12

Eros leaps out of bed with Psyche and has his pants on in moments, as though having just noticed he was taking a bath with a large number of venomous snakes.

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?”

Psyche looks sad. Wistful.

Eros calms himself down.

Reluctantly, he guesses: “You’re the game designer.”

“I was.”

“Did you know what you were doing?”

“I didn’t care.”

Eros suddenly wants some fresh air, and, just as suddenly, rain starts pouring down on the ship in sheets.

He sits on the bed.

“Tell me how to live with myself.” Implicitly: while I love a monster.

“I’m not the same person now. It was a very long time ago.”

Eros sighs.

“That helps. You regret it, is what you’re saying.”

“It was a bad idea.”

“So why do it? What were you thinking?”

Psyche gets up from her prone position, and sits next to Eros. She doesn’t look quite so sad and distant as she did, a moment ago.

“I was thinking: I need to create a union of opposites. Two halves of a whole, put together into a greater whole than was split. And it seemed to me that the union I was conceptualizing was suspiciously alike to sexual union. The whole process was analogous to life, beginning with death and ending in rebirth. So: I looked at the sexes, and applied my ideas, starting with the assumption that they were opposites. If one is hard, the other is soft. If one is active, the other is passive. I got very subtle with it. It all started to fit together. I could explain the entire cosmos as the interplay between masculine and feminine, Yin and Yang.”

Eros just listens.

“I was trying to perfect myself, so I could perfect reality. I was Man. I needed to unite with Woman, but there had to be more to it than that, because Man and Woman were everywhere, uniting all the time, and nothing was perfect.

So I hypothesized: to perfect one half, the other half has to be perfect already. Once I knew well enough what Woman was, I sculpted a statue of her. She was perfect in every detail, because she was artificial. A reified social construct. I don't think I realized it, at the time, but I must have loved her. Ironic. I was so close. If I'd only recognized that the answer wasn't in Galatea, it was in our relationship to each other, I could have saved a lot of time."

"Whoa whoa, hang on. Did you say Galatea?"

"That's what I named her. The statue."

"You didn't happen to call yourself Pygmalion at the time, did you?"

Psyche gives Eros an odd look.

"You did! Holy shit! We've met before!"

Tiamat, verse 12

Apsu is confused.

Apsu! Confused!

It is a mystery.

He explains to Tiamat: "I don't know what to do."

Now, in addition to being a mystery, it is a crisis. Apsu doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what Tiamat wants; yet she just told him what she wants!

Tiamat panics and swallows him. THAT is what she wants. The crisis isn't resolved, but she feels viscerally better.

Then again, Apsu could have chosen his words differently, so now he continues: "Do you want your descendants to live, or to die?"

"Yes."

"You can't have both."

"I know."

"Which do you prefer?"

That is a new question.

Which does she prefer?

Tiamat anchors her thinking: there, within her, in one of her wombs, is a titan. There are many others. Every one of them is unique, and precious, including this one. She could reach inside, tear it out of herself, and devour it. She has never done that. It would have been much easier to deliver her children that way, but it was more enjoyable to make Apsu do it, so she didn't. Regardless:

she could kill this one. She could, just as easily, kill all of them. She hasn't. Is that because she prefers that they live?

She wants them to live.

She wants them to live forever.

She wants them to die, immediately, too.

"I have no preference."

"Then I cannot act, but inaction is equivalent to acting as if you prefer I do not interfere. Which would you prefer: that I interfere in their lives, or not?"

"I have no preference in this either."

"That is a problem. There is no third possibility. If I cannot choose any of the possibilities available to me, I will die."

Tiamat lunges and swallows him again, in expression of the urgent sentiment, "No! Don't die!", and he dies.

But if he had evaded her, he would say: "What will I do?"

Tiamat considers the problem. It's only a problem because his mind works differently from hers. The situation resembles Apsu facing Tiamat with the decision of whether he should be her companion or her consort, ultimately. That is an important decision, and she hasn't made it yet, but she intends to, eventually. They are not equally desirable options: at the moment, she prefers Apsu to be her consort, but, in the end, she prefers Apsu to be her companion. All that means is that she won't get to feel him inside her. She could still feel him outside her. He doesn't die just from touching her. It isn't as good, but it's much better than being alone. Anything would be. It's the one thing she doesn't want.

Tiamat can make that choice later. Much later. This choice has to be made now. Aside from its immediacy, it isn't important; she has no preference. No matter what, everything will be fine.

So she delegates.

"Choose."

"How will I choose?"

"Choose arbitrarily."

Business as usual resumes.

Verse 13

Sif has encountered the faceless man, an entity which emerged from the hot spring near the top of the highest mountain in the world, where her quest will

come to an end.

She asks: "Do you know of my quest?"

"I do not."

"I quest to redeem myself, heal my marriage, and make right what has gone wrong. Can you aid me in this?"

"I can."

"Will you, then?"

The faceless man takes an unnervingly long time to answer. He's perfectly still; Sif can't tell if he's breathing, and she certainly can't read his expression.

Then: "Yes."

"Y-you will? Just like that?"

"Yes."

"No tricks?"

"No tricks."

"No series of heroic feats to perform?"

"Nothing like that. I will simply aid you."

Sif sits down heavily, and releases a breath she feels like she's been holding for a long time.

"Explain the situation, please?"

"I broke my husband's heart." And Loki's teeth. "I decided I have to fix what I did, so I'm trying to do what Thor would do—Thor is my husband—and go on a quest of redemption. But I am not a warrior, and I wouldn't know what to do even if I were. I asked the great sorceress Sigyn, Loki's wife, to dinner, hoping she could teach me magic that I could use on my quest. She agreed, and she's been...helping me...ever since. She told me my quest would end here. Maybe you were what she had in mind?"

"No."

"N-no?"

"No", he repeats. "She intended to imprison you in the locket with your husband for all eternity, thus bringing your quest to an end. You would have been trapped about ten seconds from now, if I had not arrived."

Sif gapes. "What? She—are we safe here?"

"Yes."

"Oh. The mountain. Are—is—is that you? Blocking her magic?"

"No. She lied about that. She hasn't been observing you, because she was

taking a bubble bath.”

“What?! How would you know that? How would you know ANY of that?”

He raises his arms to his sides, palm up. “I don’t. I am guessing.”

“...but you’re a very good guesser.”

“Yes.”

“How good?”

“Very good.”

“Can you guess when my labor will start?”

“Two hundred seventy-seven thousand and sixteen seconds from now.” He wobbles a hand in front of him. “Approximately.”

“...that’s...um...very good, if you’re right.”

“Thank you.”

Sif sets her mace down, and rubs her temples.

Thor’s quests never go like this.

She would know. He’s told her all about every last one.

She wants to hear him tell another tale of his exploits, so much. A new tale.

At some point the faceless man walks over to pat her, stiffly, on the head. “There there”, he says, disconcertingly. She realizes she’d started to cry.

“I just—I just want to see my husband alive again.”

A white-gloved hand with long, thin fingers is offered. “I’ll take you to see him, then.”

Pygmalion and Galatea, verse 13

The world is young, and little is known. The map has yet to be drawn, and the territory is vast and wild. Pygmalion decides to undertake a cartography of the deep laws of nature.

He invents the concept of concepts.

From this point on, Pygmalion is the first and greatest magician.

Now he creates more concepts, and tries to match them to percepts, in a continuous two-way process. Some fit well, others not so well. However, even the aptest of concepts does not perfectly fit what he perceives, no matter how he tries. It’s as though imperfection is inherent to his world.

He tries harder.

He invents the concept of a conceptual framework, tying many concepts together into a whole greater than its parts. He invents the concepts of opposition and complementarity. He creates a conceptual universe in which the interplay of simple dualities results in emergent behavior that closely resembles the reality he perceives himself to be inside. Very closely.

He decides: close enough.

He adopts the hypothesis that reality follows the same laws as his conceptual universe, assuming minor deviations are explained by imperfections in his perception rather than being inevitable consequences of living in an imperfect reality, which seems a safe assumption. It is Pygmalion, himself, who is flawed.

He determines to change that. Change is the interplay of opposites. So, he creates his own opposite.

The statue Pygmalion sculpts is of a woman. First she is beautiful; then he refines his methods, and makes her transcendental; then he refines his methods more, until she is perfect. The statue is no longer a statue of a woman. It is a statue of Woman. Pygmalion's statue has the quality of reproducibility: an independent sculptor with the same knowledge of the workings of the universe as Pygmalion would sculpt a statue that is precisely identical to this one, in every detail. The curves of her figure are mathematically inevitable. She is Woman. She could not be other than exactly as she is, any more than three could cease to be prime.

The goddess Aphrodite is between lovers at the moment.

She spies a man.

It isn't spying. Well, at first it isn't spying. At first she just happens to notice him. It only becomes spying after she sneaks over and hides in some shrubs to get a better view.

The man is making out with a statue. Not too unusual.

Except: he is SERIOUSLY making out with that statue.

Holy shit. Look at him go.

He seems to be lost in thought. Aphrodite isn't sure he's actually aware of what he's doing. His mind is elsewhere. This is just his body acting in its absence, doing what bodies do, and Aphrodite has a keen appreciation for what bodies do. This particular body is expressing utter, inhibitionless devotion toward a block of marble. A rock! What kind of maniac cares so much about a stone? Answer: her kind of maniac. Just watching him is doing things for her.

She has to get her some of that action.

Aphrodite inheres herself in the statue of Pygmalion, and enlivens it.

Now she finds herself in Pygmalion's embrace. He's kissing her. Not skillfully, but passionately, and completely, absolutely, un-self-consciously. Which only makes sense. He thinks he's alone.

She kisses back.

Then, a miracle happens.

Tiamat, verse 13

Tiamat is outside time and space.

There are three things that could mean:

Tiamat is before time and space.

Tiamat is beyond time and space.

Tiamat is beside time and space.

All three are true.

Verse 14

Sif takes the hand of the faceless man, and, the next thing she knows, the two of them are there in her home.

Thor is there, sitting, in his chair, the way he did before Sigyn enspelled him. Staring at nothing.

"THOR!"

Sif rushes to him, but finds herself wheeling her legs in the air, held up by the back of her dress.

"You shouldn't touch him right now."

After she stops flailing, the faceless man gently sets her on her feet.

"...what spell is this?"

"You don't know it. It makes us unnoticeable, provided we don't directly interact with anyone."

He makes a gesture as if tapping the shoulder of someone who isn't there. Sif puzzles over that for a second—it should be the unnoticeable one tapping the shoulder, shouldn't it?—then shakes her head. That isn't the answer she's looking for anyway.

"I mean: what brought us here? How did you free Thor? What is happening?"

"I brought us here, I did not free Thor, and I am letting you see your husband."

He ticks the answers off on three fingers, then resumes what is apparently his normal posture: hands clasped behind back, feet close together, not the slightest trace of a slouch. Absolutely still.

Sif opens her mouth.

She shuts it.

It occurs to her that the faceless man may not be very intelligent. May not even, actually, be a man. Or a person.

She chooses her words carefully.

“Why shouldn’t I touch him?”

“That would break the spell, allowing Thor to notice us, introducing an inconsistency in your subjective reality.”

Sif understands the individual words, but fails to attach meaning to the statement as a whole.

“Why is it...that...a bad thing?”

“You should ask me a different question.”

Sif waits for him to continue. He doesn’t.

“Um. What question should I ask you?”

“What do you want to happen?”

“What do you want to—oh, um. You’re asking me that?”

“Yes.”

What does Sif want to happen?

She wants Thor to rush to her among fields of wheat, sweep up her delicate body in his arms, and dance with her, spinning. She wants it to be like the first time she saw him. To feel his arms and his chest, holding her aloft as though she were light as a feather, guiding her through the air like a bird in flight; to look into his eyes, twinkling brilliantly with laughter, the same bright blue as the warm spring sky above. To feel herself smitten, instantly and with tremendous force, as though struck by lightning. To be helpless: to know she’ll never be able to stop loving him, no matter how she tries, and surrendering to the absolute inevitability of that fact. To feel the cool fresh air of freedom. To laugh, again.

“...can’t you guess what I want?”

“Yes. I did it. I can’t guess what you want next, though, because you haven’t decided yet.”

Sif looks around.

“You did...what?”

Eros and Psyche, verse 14

“Wow”, Eros says. “That was a good time.”

Psyche recovers from the shock, and punches him in the shoulder. “That was a terrible time!”

“Ha! Well, I enjoyed it.”

“I know you did. I did too, except I was too ignorant to notice. I thought Galatea came alive because my theories were true, but then, after a few days, she started acting in the most unWomanly fashion, and I couldn’t figure out why.”

“Hey, I tried my best. It’s not my fault your perfect image of the feminine wasn’t big enough for all THIS.”

Eros indicates his highly attractive physique.

“You had sex with another man!”

“That was between me and him. Then it was just between me.”

Eros smiles. Psyche frowns at him in exaggerated outrage.

“I’m talking about his c—”

“I KNOW you’re talking about his cock. I was right there!”

“You should have said something if it bothered you.”

“I did! I said a lot of things. Loudly.”

“I mean you should have said something afterward. I was busy. It’s rude to interrupt.”

Psyche groans in frustration and lets herself fall backward, landing on the bed with a soft pwoof. She palms her eyes.

Hey: that’s not something Psyche would do. Where’s the imperturbable mistress of aloof sagacity?

Hey! This whole conversation has been different.

“Hey.”

“What.”

“Did you change again when I wasn’t looking?”

“When you asked me what I was thinking. I made my thinking closer to how it was, back then, so it’d be easier to answer.”

“Does that mean you died? Do I have to make you re-fall in love with me again?”

“I already love you, you dope.”

“Whew! Good. Because I love this you, too.”

“You love everyone. That is manifestly apparent.”

“Hey.”

“Yeeeee?”

“I sort of thought that god-of-change thing was involuntary for you. Can you just do that whenever you want? And make whatever changes you want?”

“There are limits to what I can change into, but, yes, I can change whenever I want, and I can make whatever changes I want within those limitations.”

“Is that the reason you’ve never made yourself biologically female? Can’t make it happen, somehow?”

“I can make it happen. I just never had a good reason to.”

“Make it happen.”

“Why?”

“Whim of kinkiness.”

Psyche shrugs. “That’s a good enough reason for me.”

She looks almost the same.

Tiamat, verse 14

Tiamat observes while Apsu interferes in the lives of her descendants.

It isn’t the most enjoyable thing he can do for her, but it is enjoyable in a qualitatively different way, and, from her perspective—though not from his—it takes literally no time at all.

He enters spacetime at an arbitrary point. Here, there is a party. He attends the party. The partygoers resent his presence. After an arbitrary time, he leaves.

“How was that?”

“I liked it.”

That was still fairly minimal interference. Apsu could have interfered more, so he did. He attends the party before he will attend.

This time he decides to assume a fabricated identity, arbitrarily. He blends into the crowd. There is mingling; he mingles. Some partygoers form lasting feelings of friendship with him. He maintains the masquerade for some decades. He makes many arbitrary decisions. He alters many lives. The creature he is pretending to be has a finite lifespan, so he fakes his death at a plausible time,

in a plausible way. Then he returns to the side of Tiamat.

“And that?”

“I liked that, also.”

He continues.

Verse 15

Sif is being aided by the faceless man, who is a very powerful person—or thing—that isn’t very smart.

It takes her a while to figure out how to converse with him usefully. He seems to have the opposite of the power to read minds. Except:

“I’m thinking of a number between one and one thousand. What is it?”

“Seven.”

He can read her mind. Or he’s just a very good guesser, like he says. So Sif is confused at how unhelpful he is. He’s completely cooperative, as far as she can tell; his magic seems nearly as powerful as Sigyn’s; and he can read her mind. But he hasn’t done anything that meaningfully improves her life. All he’s done is shown her a vision of her husband, alive and unwell. Although, no: maybe he did do something.

“You said Sigyn was going to enspell me...?”

“Yes.”

“But I’m safe now.”

“Yes.”

“Did you do something to her?”

“No.”

Sif lets out a puff of air. She tries: “Please tell me everything I need to know to stop feeling so confused.”

“All right. When you decided you wanted to see your husband alive again, I took you to the present moment, on the day before you invited Sigyn to dinner, when your husband is alive, so you could see him again. I was able to do this for reasons intrinsic to my nature, and did not cast any spells other than the one I mentioned. I do not know any other spells. In my subjective experience of events, I learned it between the moment you took my hand and the moment we arrived here, by taking a detour to another part of time and space, drawing out the guardian of the waters of forgetfulness, and answering its riddle. I have not lied to you or attempted to deceive you in any way at any point during this time, and I will continue to aid you in your quest until it is complete.”

Sif feels less confused. More terrified and overwhelmed, but less confused. She has enough experience with strange spirits, now, that she noticed the important part in all that.

“What will you do...AFTER I consider my quest to be complete?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 15

It’s been seven years since Aphrodite’s sailing voyage with Psyche, and she still thinks about it all the time.

Psyche changed her. Not in a big way, but in a good way, she thinks. Her attitude is just a little bit different, and that makes her relationships a little bit different too. She’d already lost all preconceptions about men and women, a long time ago. She would have said: everyone is a mix. Masculine, feminine, we’re all both, and then some. It’s just a matter of which side of yourself you express in this situation or that one.

Now, though: she’s pretty sure there aren’t sides.

Except that people choose sides. War ensues.

In the war between the sexes, Aphrodite has been fighting for peace for a very long time. She’s not on the side of the men or the women: she’s on the side of love. That hasn’t changed, and never will. What’s changed is her strategy. Psyche convinced her that a dynamic balance between the sexes, where everyone wins, isn’t going to happen.

So, how is she going to win?

They made shore for good a few days after Psyche’s big reveal. That was the natural conclusion to the relationship; what followed was just an encore. (Psyche had to admit that, yes, biological sex is a difference that makes a difference. More than she expected, and less than most people would.)

Aphrodite needed some time to process. Some space.

Of course, she processes best with company. She just needed space away from Psyche.

Her relationships are a little bit different. It’s a subtle thing. People make assumptions about her, based on her appearance. At the start of a relationship, this is a good thing: assumptions save a lot of time. But, as time goes on, assumptions tend to overstay their welcome. She responds differently to that now. Where before she might think, “I’m not that girly”, now she thinks, “I’m not that fragile”.

Girliness, i.e., femininity, is a hugely complex concept. It involves all kinds of things. Aphrodite is very girly in some ways, and not at all in others. Fragile, no; sensitive, oh yes.

Suppose she wants to convey an image of toughness and sensitivity, because she wants to convey the truth about herself to people, at a glance.

What does THAT look like?

Well, it looks like a certain kind of man. The kind of man Aphrodite was with Psyche. What's the feminine equivalent of that?

Aphrodite comes up blank.

It's a big problem for her. 'Tough and sensitive' isn't all there is to her, but it's definitely part of her, and she can only make herself look like it—in this culture, anyway—if she makes herself a man. That would be fine with her, except: not everyone is attracted to men.

Suppose she's attracted to an individual of the gynosexual persuasion? What then?

Well, then that individual is probably going to make some false assumptions about her. That then. Aphrodite is in the minority: most people take gender into account.

And, honestly, so does she. Even now.

Gender matters.

It matters as much as biological sex. Maybe more. In fact: definitely more.

It shapes who people are.

Aphrodite used to think: how beautiful! Gender is integral to who we are! But gender is made up. It's one big hoax. It's a flat out lie, and people use it to define themselves, and each other.

Seven years of relationships with people who believe the lie with all their hearts. Some sexual relationships—okay, a lot of sexual relationships—but just as many non-sexual, if not more.

It's a lie. Aphrodite doesn't wish she still believed it.

It was such a COMFORTABLE lie, though.

This isn't comfortable at all.

Tiamat, verse 15

Apsu enters spacetime. He builds a house. He contrives to lose it in a gambling game. It falls into the possession of a young couple. Many consequences follow from this. He leaves.

Tiamat likes that.

Apsu enters spacetime. He meets a fisherman. They spend several decades fishing together regularly. They become dear friends. He snaps his old friend's neck, killing him instantly. He leaves.

Tiamat likes that, also.

The fact that Apsu is the one doing these things is inconsequential. She would like it equally well if they had all happened without him. His actions don't have any bearing on her opinion of him; she barely has an opinion of him. She doesn't like him. She wants him. She enjoys him. That has nothing to do with this. 'Like' is a specific feeling for her, which she only feels towards her descendants. It's not a very strong feeling, but it is pleasant, and it is distinct. It's a feeling that says: ah, this happens too.

Apsu enters spacetime. He steals an extremely powerful propulsion device. He leaves. He enters spacetime elsewhere, places the device, and activates it. He leaves once more. A moon collides into a planet that had burgeoned with life.

Ah! This happens, too.

Verse 16

Sif witnesses her past self walking into the room, and having a one-sided conversation with her husband.

This is among the least distressing things about her situation.

"Is it okay if I just...think about all this? For a while? Will you wait?"

"As long as you like."

She tries to think, but the faceless man keeps standing there. Regarding her, facelessly.

"Um. Could you..."

She takes a breath. She reminds herself: do not make careless requests of the instantaneously cooperative, all-powerful time traveler who takes everything literally.

The faceless man waits.

"...could you please take me back to the hot spring, leave me alone until I feel ready to talk to you again, and make it so nothing bad happens before then?"

"In what frame of reference?"

"Ah...excuse me?"

"In what frame of reference do you want me to make nothing bad happen before you feel ready to talk to me again?"

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand what you mean by that.”

“Do you want me to put you back at the hot spring, and do the same thing I did to prevent Sigyn from imprisoning you?”

Sif carefully thinks about whether that is literally what she meant.

“Can you explain to me what you did, exactly?”

“Yes, but it would take longer than you’d like.”

“How long would it take?”

“Slightly more than three years.”

Sif manages to not scream. She isn’t even sure what it is she feels like screaming about. She just feels like screaming. She feels...screamy.

“YES I want you to take me back to the hot spring and do the thing you did! Please.”

He takes her back to the hot spring. He leaves her alone; he’s nowhere in sight. She has no way to tell if he did the other thing.

Sif returns herself to the state she was in before the faceless man appeared and everything became very complicated, very quickly. She eases into the hot spring.

Aaaaah.

Okay.

Nothing bad is going to happen if she just sits here, and soaks, and thinks for as long as she needs to.

Try to believe it.

It occurs to Sif that the faceless man could be invisibly observing her right now. While she’s in the hot spring. Naked.

She gets out and puts her dress back on. Then she says, “Faceless man?”

“Yes?”

Sif squeaks and spins around to see the faceless man standing there, regarding her, facelessly.

“Um. Were you watching me bathe?”

“No. I was leaving you alone.”

“Then...ah...you...guessed when I would want you to come back. I guess?”

“I confirm your guess.”

“Okay. Thank you. Please leave me alone again until I want you to come back.”

“As you like.”

He is suddenly not there.

That was...about as comforting as could be hoped for. Sif goes back to soaking. Eventually, she manages to reach a place where she doesn't feel like she's running for her life.

What does she want to happen, next?

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 16

Psyche doesn't know what to do with herself.

She's changed a lot, in the last seven years, but somehow she can't change into a person who has something to do.

She drifts.

She actually did learn something, watching Aphrodite go through lovers like...like...an insatiable, extradimensional, lover-devouring monster.

It's an imperfect simile.

There are limits to what Psyche can change into. In particular, she can't make herself outright BETTER any more easily than anyone else can. If she could, she would have made herself perfect a long time ago. Facility with analogy isn't a top priority right now. Neither is the ability to maintain a focused stream of thought.

She's letting her mind wander.

She's not sure where she's going, anymore, so the best she can do is go nowhere in particular QUICKLY.

According to her own stories about herself, Aphrodite rarely stays in one relationship for longer than a couple years. A month or so is typical for her, and one-night stands are not at all uncommon. Less common than you'd guess based on her bravado, though. Aphrodite has been going nowhere quickly for as long as Psyche has been going somewhere in the wrong direction, and Aphrodite, it seems, is winning the race. Psyche is not above blatant imitation.

She even tries her hand at Aphrodite's lifestyle, for a few months, but she's so disastrously bad at it that it's ridiculous.

She can't get a date to save her life!

Then she makes some adjustments to her appearance, and all of a sudden she's lousy with suitors who are horrible people. Which isn't entirely their fault. It's probably mostly hers. If she didn't want to be objectified, maybe she shouldn't have invented subject-object duality and conceptually entangled it with accidents of birth. Also, she could just go back to being a man, but Aphrodite

doesn't need to be a man to get what she wants, and, darn it, Psyche shouldn't either.

But Psyche doesn't want love.

She doesn't. She really, honestly doesn't. It's nice enough, but it isn't what she's after.

Love is a means to an end.

It's a process. It's a force. The opposite of fear. Attraction and repulsion.

Except, that isn't all there is to it. Love isn't just attraction. It's transformative.

Aphrodite changed Psyche.

Tiamat, verse 16

Tiamat is not a monster.

Verse 17

Sif contemplates her life.

She's going to have her first child soon. In some big number of seconds.

Her husband, the mightiest warrior in history, is trapped inside a locket, in stasis.

The most powerful sorceress in the world wants to do the same to her.

She has command over what might be the most powerful living entity, of any kind, ever, anywhere.

What does she want to happen next?

The idea of answering that question makes Sif feel sick.

Everything bad that has happened so far is her fault. She asked for Sigyn's help, knowing Sigyn was evil; everything bad that happened during her quest goes back to that decision. And she made that decision because of other, worse decisions she made before. Sif ruins everything when she decides what should happen next. It's like Vali said: she's willful. It's her worst quality. A willful woman is barely a woman at all. If only she had listened to—to—

Who hasn't she listened to?

She always listened, when she was a servant in Odin's house. The others would listen, mostly, but then they would complain. Sometimes they would pretend not to have understood. Not Sif. Everyone thought she was too afraid of Odin to be disobedient, but, honestly, she just liked feeling helpful.

She always listened to Thor.

Of course she always listened to Thor.

All Thor wanted in the whole wide world was to make her happy. Sif feels the same way towards him. After their child is born—if—

Sif lets herself cry. She has all the time she needs.

She listened to Vali.

She listened to Sigyn.

She even listened to the faceless man.

Is Sif really so willful? She bends like a reed. Maybe Vali wasn't right about everything. Plenty of bad things happened because she listened to Sigyn, rather than going her own way. It would be better to be MORE willful, around her, at least.

Sigyn is a terrible woman.

But she's a powerful sorceress.

That's why, isn't it? It's will. Sigyn's will is strong, and Sif's is weak. Sif is still the worst sorceress in the world. Her best spell amounts to a pinky swear; all it did to Sigyn was make her decide to end Sif's life. Sigyn is definitely willful. It isn't even her worst quality, but she's the most willful person Sif knows.

She blinks.

No, that's not true.

Thor is the most willful person Sif knows.

It's his greatest virtue.

What would Thor do? Not bend, that's certain. He wouldn't bend for anyone or anything. He'll break before he bends.

Oh.

Oh, Thor.

Sif didn't break him. All this time, she thought she had, but she should have seen how ridiculous that idea is. She isn't strong enough to break him. She'll never be that strong. The only one strong enough to break Thor is Thor.

Sometimes strength is a weakness.

Sif isn't perfect. Thor would say she is, but she's not. Thor isn't perfect either; she can see that, now. She doesn't love him any less.

Sif isn't perfect, but she isn't the worst person in the world. She's just Sif, with all Sif's virtues and her flaws.

Some of her virtues are also flaws, and some of her flaws are also virtues.

Sif could never have broken that way. If Thor were unfaithful to her, it would hurt her dearly, but she would forgive him at once. He's Thor; it's unreasonable to expect any one woman could be enough for him. He could take a new woman every day until the end of time, and Sif would always forgive him, although it would never stop hurting.

If not even that would break her, could anything?

Sif goes to the darkest corner of herself that she can find.

Losing her child would be worse.

It's the worst thing she can imagine.

Thor wouldn't tolerate it for an instant. If their child died, he would drag the underworld back up to the world of the living with nothing but a strong chain and his own two hands. But Thor is trapped, and broken. Sif couldn't do anything like that.

Could she accept it, if she lost her child forever?

The thought alone is the worst pain she's ever felt. It's like plunging her hand into molten iron. THIS is the worst thing she can imagine. It would be a never-healing wound. It would never get any better, only worse. Every moment from then on would be struck through with black sorrow. It takes a long, long time before she can hold on to the question long enough to see the answer.

She could accept it.

Sif is a monster.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 17

One day Aphrodite finds Psyche at the side of a lake, feeding the ducks.

She looks completely different.

Her hair is brown, and short. She's wearing a jacket instead of a blouse, and jeans instead of a skirt. Her body type is a distant relative of what it was. Before Aphrodite might have said she looks like a cactus blossom: something beautiful, delicate, and temporary, growing in the most improbably hostile conditions. Now she looks more like a cactus. It's a mystery to Aphrodite how she even recognizes that who she's looking at is Psyche, but the shiny silver tie might have something to do with it.

Aphrodite calls out to her, in a loud, ragged stage whisper, with entirely affected outrage: "You."

Psyche turns, nonplussed.

Aphrodite looks completely different too, but that's just a coincidence without

any allegorical meaning. Psyche doesn't recognize her.

With clenched fists and quick stomps, Aphrodite marches right up to Psyche, who has no idea what issue this woman could possibly have with her. She grabs her tie, and before Psyche has a chance to respond, she's being passionately kissed full on the lips.

Aphrodite kisses in a manner expressing the sentiment: I am angry at you and in love with you, and I see no contradiction in this!

Psyche's shocked limpness expresses the sentiment: I have no idea what's happening right now!

She glances at the ducks, Aphrodite's lips still locked on her face. They don't know either.

Aphrodite breaks the kiss to say, "Did you miss me?"

"Guh?"

"Just as articulate as I remember."

Psyche connects the dots. "Aphrodite?"

Aphrodite smiles sweetly, and goes in for another kiss.

Psyche stops her with a headbutt, breaking her nose, then throws her bodily in the lake. This is surprising for many reasons. One is that Aphrodite presently has six inches and about forty pounds on her.

The ducks fly away. Aphrodite thrashes and splutters. Psyche crouches and watches her with a cold, placid expression while she gets her bearings. She's genuinely shocked, hurt and confused now. She yells at Psyche, "Howy shih! Wha was da fow?"

"We're both morons and I'm going to tell you why you're a moron."

Aphrodite bobs, holding her bloody nose.

"O-ay", she quacks.

Psyche helps her out of the lake.

Tiamat, verse 17

Apsu is proficient at bringing about the events that he arbitrarily chooses to.

He chooses to have a blind mute child elected leader of its world at the age of six. He places a pebble that trips a merchant, several hundred years before the child is born. A chain of causality occurs. That which was intended is achieved.

Not very likely. But possible.

Verse 18

The sun goes down, and Sif sleeps. She wakes when it rises, feeling calm, but not pure. She cannot find the thread of her thoughts from before. Instead she has a tapestry, not fully woven. She can only look at its texture as a whole. It starts with paradise and ends with perdition. Where can it go, from there?

Sif is ready to talk to the faceless man, again, which can be inferred from his presence on the mountain.

“Hello again.”

“Hello, faceless man. Thank you for giving me that time to myself.”

“You’re quite welcome, Sif.”

“I don’t know what I want to happen next.”

“Do you want me to help you figure it out?”

“Yes, please.”

“By what criteria do you judge how much you want something?”

“I don’t know that either.”

The faceless man puts a hand to his chin, pensively.

“What do you value?”

Sif doesn’t answer right away.

The faceless man is very literal.

If she says she values her husband, will he transform everyone in the world into Thor? She wouldn’t value that.

She values her husband, and her child; but also she values little things. Things that don’t really matter, but she values them anyway. She values Thor’s great victories, and her small ones.

“I value too many things to name them all.”

“Is there a factor common to all of the things you value?”

Is there?

“I’m not sure. Love?”

As far as Sif notices, the faceless man doesn’t move from where he stands.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 18

Aphrodite and Psyche sit at a table together, drinking tea. Aphrodite wears an impressive bandage on her nose—Psyche’s work, in both ways—while Psyche

explains why she is a moron.

"You and I are after the same thing."

Aphrodite pounds the table as she sips. She knows this one.

"Nookie!"

"No. We want to make the world better."

"Vague."

"It's necessarily vague. Reality is vague. We do the best we can anyway. I fumble along through trial and error, while you bone everything alive."

"I object. Some living things are asexual, and I don't bone those. I cuddle them."

"You like to think you're perfectly egalitarian, but you know what? You aren't. You're biased. Heavily."

Aphrodite raises an eyebrow.

"Did you ever wonder why I took you on that sailing trip?"

"Sure. At first, I thought you were trying to give me a scientifically perfected love experience, which would've been adorably misguided. Then you dropped the gender whammy, and obviously that was your plan from the start, so I figured you were trying to share some of your arcane knowledge with me in your characteristically convoluted fashion."

"You got the how right, but not the why."

"Okay, I'll bite. If you ask me it was good enough reason in itself, but: why?"

"I wanted to change the game."

Tiamat, verse 19

Occasionally Apsu learns something new. When that happens, he consults with Tiamat.

"They love, like me."

Tiamat likes knowing these things.

She wants to know more.

"How do they know of me?"

"They don't know of you."

"Then how do they want me to eat them?"

"They don't want you to eat them."

“How do they love, then?”

“They love differently.”

“What do they love?”

Apsu doesn't know that yet.

Verse 20

“What do you love?”

Sif can answer this question with no ambiguity. She doesn't hesitate for a moment.

“I love Thor, my husband, and I love our unborn child.”

“What do they want?”

“I don't yet know what my child will want, and my husband doesn't want anything right now, because he's an inanimate object.”

“Ah.”

The faceless man puts his hands on his hips, deliberately. He turns his head to look in one random direction, pauses, then another. Sif watches him, confused, for several seconds, before she realizes that he's trying to look like he's thinking.

“I understand the problem now. You don't know what you want because you don't know what your loved ones want.”

Sif experiences enlightenment.

She doesn't know what she wants because she doesn't know what her loved ones want.

It's so clear. It's so true.

She doesn't know. But: she can guess.

Thor would want her to be happy.

She can't be happy unless Thor is happy.

The faceless man could probably free Thor from the locket, but that wouldn't make him any happier than he was before Sif's quest began. Until Sif redeems herself, keeping him in the locket is a mercy. So—

Sif puts her face in her palms.

Thor would have asked this question much, much sooner.

She recovers herself.

“Faceless man, what do I need to do to redeem myself?”

“How do you mean?”

“The reason for my quest is that I was unfaithful. My husband broke his heart trying to fix my mistake, but my mistake is mine; only I can make it right. I just don’t know how. Even if I knew what to do, I might not be strong enough to do it, but I can get stronger if that’s what it takes.”

The faceless man regards her for several disquieting seconds.

Then he says: “I don’t understand.”

Sif stares at him.

“What don’t you understand?”

“What was your mistake?”

“I slept with a man other than my husband.”

It sounds even worse, saying it like that.

“How is that a mistake?”

Sif opens and closes her mouth. She moves her arms around.

“By definition!”

“Then what is defined to redeem unfaithfulness?”

“I don’t know! That’s why I’m asking you!”

“I don’t know either.”

“Can you guess?”

“No.”

Sif is starting to feel screamy again.

She breathes.

“Unfaithfulness is unredeemable. So there’s no definition for what redeems it.”

“If that’s the case, your quest is impossible.”

Sif nods.

“I can’t aid you in an impossible quest.”

“What?! Why not?”

“It’s impossible.”

“Thor completed impossible quests all the time! Sometimes more than one before supper!”

“You are confusing impossible with very difficult.”

Sif scrunches her eyes shut. This man is impossible! With effort, she masters

herself again.

“My quest isn’t impossible. It’s just very difficult.”

“Then I can aid you.”

“How?”

“How would you like?”

Sif screams.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 20

Psyche changed Aphrodite because she wanted to change the game.

Aphrodite sips tea.

Companionably, she asks: “Were you out of your fucking mind?”

“I still want to.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“If you’re asking whether I want to fuck, which, knowing you, you are, the answer is no.”

“Don’t you think you did enough damage the first time? That wound has just barely started to heal. It’s healing, though. I see it every day. Let me guess: the situation isn’t changing fast enough for you?”

“I detect an air of hostility.”

“YOU’RE the one who broke my nose. Just for the record, if you make the war between the sexes any more violent, oppressive and inescapable than it already is, I’m going to break more than your nose. I’ll break your hips. I know how. I’ve done it before.”

“Noted. Now will you allow me to continue telling you how to end your dumbass war?”

Aphrodite sets down her cup.

“I’ll allow it.”

Psyche leans forward, resting her forearms on the table, hands clasped. She has a grimly determined look on her face, and a very intense look in her eyes. She doesn’t look like a peacemaker. She looks, and sounds, like a general. Laying out her plans for battle. She speaks in the low, gravelly, conspiratorial monotone of someone who knows exactly what the odds of success are, and is dead set on proceeding regardless.

“Sex and gender are different things.”

Aphrodite rolls her eyes. “Psyche, I don’t know if you—”

“Let me finish, damn it. You can’t rush a proof. I have to go step by step. Sex and gender are different things. Sex is notionally a fact of nature. It’s a concept derived from actual observable phenomena. Chromosomes and reproductive organs. Sex isn’t sexy. Gender is sexy.”

Aphrodite doesn’t interrupt. Gender is, indeed, sexy. Which she used to consider an unambiguously good thing.

Psyche asks: “What gender am I?”

“I sense a trick.”

She rolls up her sleeves. Her expression betrays no humor.

Aphrodite smirks.

“You appear female to me, Professor.”

“Safe wording. It’s important to distinguish between gender itself, perceived gender, and gender identity. No one really has a gender. That would be like having an octahedron. If you look octahedral, though, someone might say: you’re an octahedron. That’s the equivalent of perceived gender. Gender identity is what you feel like you are, as opposed to how you appear. They both draw from the same deck of cards, but your gender identity is never exactly the same as your perceived gender. If it’s different enough to be noticeable by the majority, you get stuck with a label. Perceived gender can also differ between observers. Any argument about whose perception is actually correct is bogus. No one is an octahedron, no matter who says they are. I appear female to you. Am I?”

“How should I know? I haven’t seen you naked yet.”

“Wrong answer.”

“Ugh. No, Professor, you aren’t. No one is an octahedron.”

“Another wrong answer. You get one more try.”

That one Aphrodite can’t respond to flippantly. She actually thought that was an easy question, and Psyche was just forcing her to answer it for the sake of being condescending. So...it’s not ‘no’, and it’s not ‘I don’t know’.

“...yes you are?”

“Still no. You don’t get it yet. It’s a trick question.”

“You said—!”

“Any meaning you perceive in the presence or absence of a sleeve is on you.”

Tiamat, verse 20

“They are confused about what they love.”

“Mm.”

“Some are more confused than others.”

Tiamat contemplates the implications of that. Her descendants are very strange.

“How do they act?”

“Inconsistently.”

Verse 21

The first time Sif lost her temper, she smashed Loki’s teeth out with the hammer Mjolnir.

The second time, she burned the faceless man with plasma balls shot from her nose.

(It was an ordinary fireball shot from the palm of her hand. Nose plasma isn’t a real spell. That would have been neat, though, right?)

Sif covers her mouth, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry!”

The corpse of the faceless man smolders.

“I forgive you.”

He’s standing behind her.

Sif does a double take.

In one take, he’s a charred husk.

In the other, he’s fine.

It seems very likely that time travel is involved here, somehow.

“O-okay. Thank you.”

The faceless man puts his hand on her shoulder for a moment, in a poor imitation of an affiliative gesture. Then he returns to default posture.

Sif feels very small, again.

“Faceless man...should I be afraid of you?”

“If you prefer.”

“I mean: is there a good reason for me to be?”

“What would you consider a good reason?”

“Will you do something horrible if I say the wrong thing to you?”

“I have no way to judge whether something is horrible or not, because your value system is presently indeterminate, because your husband is unavailable and your child is unborn.”

Every word matters.

He didn't say 'whether something is horrible TO YOU or not', he only said 'whether something is horrible or not'.

“Faceless man, is your judgement of right and wrong based entirely on me?”

“No.”

“What is it based on?”

“Love.”

“...love?”

He nods, once. “Love.”

Sif thought she had some idea of what the faceless man was. It is as though an unstoppable, amoral, pseudo-intelligent machine of limitless creative and destructive potential suddenly decided to give you a bashful kiss on the cheek. It's so far removed from her preconceptions that she almost forgets what she's dealing with entirely.

She asks, gently, “Who do you love, faceless man?”

“You don't know of her.”

“Is she beautiful?”

“Very.”

“Is she kind?”

“I have no way to judge that, either.”

That snaps Sif back to the nature of the situation.

“Um. What is she like?”

There's a pause.

“Large.”

She is very beautiful...and large.

That really doesn't tell Sif anything important at all.

How to get the most useful information with the least risk of catastrophe?

“...what would happen if I ask you if I can meet her?”

“I would tell you that is very unlikely to aid you in your quest.”

“Am I the first person you’ve lent aid?”

“No.”

“Have any of the others who came before me met her?”

“Yes.”

“What did they think of her?”

“Various things.”

“What did she think of them?”

“She likes them.”

Present tense.

“Does she like me?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why you lend me your aid now?”

“Yes.”

Sif sits down, exhausted. She actually accomplished something.

Maybe she can trust the faceless man, after all.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 21

Psyche takes a container of sugar, and dumps it on the table.

She pushes the sugar around with her fingers to illustrate her words.

“We have three related concepts. Gender, perceived gender, gender identity. All three are referents of the word ‘gender’. If I ask you what gender I am, you can’t answer. I haven’t given you enough information. The question is ill-formed.”

Aphrodite raises her hand.

“You may ask questions.”

“May I point out that this is really boring and I don’t see how it’s going to help anyone with anything ever?”

“No.” Psyche continues without pausing. “The fact that these concepts are linguistically undifferentiated results in people failing to recognize the difference in any way. Much sorrow ensues.”

“So you want to differentiate them. Linguistically.”

“I will present my conclusion in my own dear time.”

“Little miss grumpypants. Okay. Go on then.”

“Sexuality—”

Aphrodite pumps her fist. That’s her team!

“Charming. Sexuality is yet another concept, distinct from but related to sex and gender. Like sex, the concept of sexuality corresponds to an observable phenomenon. Sexual response to arbitrary stimulus is subject to scientific inquiry.”

Aphrodite raises her hand really high.

“We will not interrupt the lecture to conduct a controlled experiment.”

Aphrodite lowers her hand again.

“The phenomenon of sexuality—what makes you wet, let’s say—is directly influenced by concepts of gender. Ask me why.”

“Why.”

“Magic.”

Five whole seconds pass in silence, and then Aphrodite instantaneously goes from blithe, glazed-over indifference, with a healthy dose of daydreaming, to absolute unwavering attention to the present moment.

“That sounds important”, she understates.

“It should, because it is. Can you tell me why?”

Aphrodite doesn’t have a clear intellectual idea, yet, of the cause behind her adrenaline rush. So, she thinks aloud.

“Everything makes me wet.”

“You’re pansexual. That doesn’t mean literally everything makes you wet. That means you find every gender similarly attractive.”

“Right. Okay. I’m not attracted to rocks, because they’re genderless.”

Psyche holds up a teaspoon in front of Aphrodite’s face.

“This is a spoon”, she says.

“Yes”, Aphrodite confirms.

“I am going to call him Mr. Spoon.”

“Hello, Mr. Spoon.”

“Do you want to fuck Mr. Spoon?”

Aphrodite shocks even herself at how much she wants to fuck Mr. Spoon. Apparently it shows on her face, because Psyche doesn’t wait for an answer.

“I am going to walk outside now. I will return in two minutes. Please contemplate Mr. Spoon in my absence, but, so that we are not thrown out of this establishment, do not fuck him.”

Mr. Spoon is set on the table.

There is an interval of contemplation.

Psyche returns to her seat.

“I would like you to tell me if you now find yourself attracted to Mr. Spoon as an independent entity, rather than only as an implement which one of us might apply to the other.”

“Bwuh?”

“I have a point. Just do it.”

Aphrodite leans back. She parses the question, then tries to honestly answer it.

“...a little. I may have fantasized about Mr. Spoon with a moustache and a bowler cap. Briefly.”

“Do you know why that is?”

“Because he’s a dapper gentleman?”

“Because I assigned him a gender. Now he has one, in the same sense that you or I do. His spoon body is as irrelevant to his gender as our human bodies. You are pansexual, so now you want to fuck Mr. Spoon, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

Aphrodite looks at Mr. Spoon, then back to Psyche.

“I’m strangely okay with this.”

Psyche slams the table with such force that Mr. Spoon jumps. So does Aphrodite.

“Answer me this. Would you want to fuck Mr. Spoon IN THE SAME WAY if he were female instead?”

“I...yeah?”

“No, you wouldn’t. Think about it. Imagine a sexual act you might perform with Mr. Spoon, then one you might perform with a hypothetical gender-swapped version of him. Same act?”

“Different acts.”

“There you go.”

Aphrodite blinks.

“I think there’s something profound you want me to realize here, but I’m too distracted to do that because I’m really turned on and also kind of frightened

for my life because you're a violent psychopath."

"I'll leave you to it. Come back when you're ready to continue. Same time, same place."

Psyche slaps an excessive wad of cash on the table, and leaves.

After a little while spent on heavy breathing, Aphrodite leaves too.

But she pockets Mr. Spoon first.

Tiamat, verse 21

Tiamat is outside time and space. The concepts of duration and extent are inapplicable to her.

The substance of Tiamat is Tiamat.

What would one see, if one beheld Tiamat?

It depends.

A mortal would see nothing, only die, the way they do.

A demigod would be driven permanently and irretrievably insane, and unable to report on what was seen, or even remember.

A god would say there was nothing, only a sense of unease that barely touches the edge of awareness, but be haunted by dreams of vastness for all the rest of eternity.

A titan can only look on, uncomprehending, at numberless forms-beyond-form that cannot be correlated with any other experience, or with themselves.

Apsu sees beauty.

She is fractally beautiful to him.

Apsu can look on the universe and perceive the whole of it and all its details. He can track every individual warp and weft of physics, at all levels, simultaneously, without effort. He has infinite awareness and infinite comprehension. He does not have infinite intelligence; he cannot find all the meaning in what he sees at once. But he can see, and understand, all of material existence, past, present and future, at a glance.

Tiamat is not only material, but the material aspect of her, alone, is further beyond Apsu's comprehension than the whole of the universe is beyond the ken of a bacterium.

Tiamat is not only mental and material. The mental aspect of her is the same, and different.

She has a spiritual aspect, as well.

There are more aspects.

No possible method could name each such aspect uniquely, or even assign a meaningful cardinality to the set of them. Each, too, has just as many sub-aspects, and subsubaspects, and so on, ad infinitum, and every one is distinct from every other, and every one is Tiamat, Tiamat, Tiamat, herself, recursively, in whole. She is living synecdoche.

Apsu can see all of this. The slightest shift of his attention changes what he sees completely. Everything he sees—at every scale—is beautiful. At the limit of his endless life, he will have seen so little of Tiamat that he will have seen none of her, despite uninterrupted, devoted, awesomely intense attention. All of this, he can easily guess. Just as easily, he can guess how inadequate this description of Tiamat is; how inadequate any possible description would be.

“You are beautiful.”

“Mm.”

Tiamat sees only Tiamat.

Verse 22

Sif still doesn't know what she wants to happen next.

She knows what she wants to happen in the end.

She doesn't know how to get from here to there.

The faceless man can't tell her.

“I need more time to think.”

“Take as much as you need.”

Sif spends another day and night in and around the hot spring, in solitude, trying, for all she's worth, to picture what Thor would do.

It's no use. Redemption is too abstract. She knows what Thor would do if the problem were physical. She can act like Thor, sort of, but she can't make herself think like Thor. He experiences obstacles as something you have to go through to get what you want. Sif just experiences obstacles as obstacles, preventing her going that way, forcing her to reconsider what she wants. But what she wants isn't going to change.

A third night, a fourth day.

All Sif wants is to have Thor with her now.

But Thor is broken.

Her water breaks.

“Oh no.”

How many seconds are in a day?

“No no no no. Not yet. Your father isn’t here.”

Babies are unreasonable.

Sif doesn’t have all the time in the world to think this over.

Thor is broken, but he needs to be here, for this. She needs him here.

She looks at him in the locket.

He looks faintly impressed.

She kisses him. “I’m sorry, my love. I’m so sorry. I was too slow. My quest isn’t complete. Please forgive me. I’m going to hurt you more. I’m not strong enough to do this without you.”

She breathes. She winces.

She’s not strong enough to do it at all, but that doesn’t matter. It’s happening with or without her.

“Faceless man!”

“I’m here.”

He wasn’t, a moment ago.

She shows him the locket.

“Please free my husband.”

With no transition, he’s holding a confused-looking Thor up by the armpits. He sits Thor down on the ground.

Sif’s heart jumps. She looks into the locket.

She sees Thor still in there, just as he was.

What?

Thor sees his wife in labor with their child. All the broken pieces of him re-assemble at once.

“Sif!”

There is nothing but joy on his face.

“THOR!”

Thor is in air too thin for monsters, in cold dire enough to kill, on the top of the highest mountain in the world, sitting on the ground, unarmed and with no context, with an unknown creature of unknown power that is somehow responsible for all this standing right behind him.

None of that matters.

He is Thor.

His wife is having a child.

He leaps to his feet and goes to her. He tears off her armored dress as though it were an illusion; the force had to be immense, but she doesn't even bruise. He cradles her, beaming, in unquestioning confidence of her ability to handle this essentially without him, saying nothing at all but making her feel like everything is perfectly right with the world, while she gives birth.

It takes almost no time at all.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 22

Aphrodite sits at a table alone, sipping tea periodically.

Sexuality is directly influenced by gender.

Well: duh.

So why does it sound so ominous?

There's a guy making eyes at her across the room. The stimulus evokes a sexual response. She makes eyes back. They stimulate each other. Without touching. Without speaking.

Are they even close enough to each other for pheromones to be at play?

Aphrodite sniffs. She can't smell anything except tea. She has no idea how pheromones work.

Is she being DIRECTLY INFLUENCED by this guy?

Or by his gender.

What is his gender?

Three referents. Okay.

No one is an octahedron.

He appears male to her. His perceived gender is masculine. His gender identity? Normally Aphrodite wouldn't even think to wonder. All that matters is that they're attracted to each other.

She knows why she's attracted to him.

How come he's attracted to her?

She's not the only woman here. It can't just be her gender. She's not even the only PRETTY woman here.

But everyone is beautiful in their own way.

Aphrodite is the only one in the room with long, curly red hair.

Psyche walks in at about noon. Sits at her table, without greeting her.

Leans on the table. Stares at her—glares, almost—with eyes that say, “we’re going to do this for as long as it takes”.

Aphrodite nods, sips tea, holds up a finger.

“I’m gonna pee first.”

“Sublimating your desire for me to fuck you into tea-drinking is not healthy behavior.”

Aphrodite pokes at the fresh bandage on her nose. “You’re bad for me in a lot of ways. But I just can’t quit! Be right back.”

She is right back.

“Okay. Here’s what I’ve got. Every time you’ve said ‘gender’, I’ve been thinking ‘male or female’, because you have a hard-on for dualism and queer folks wouldn’t fit in your perfect clockwork universe. But you’re not that dumb. You know exactly how much you’re glossing over. I am conducting a controlled experiment with that man over there, later.”

She hooks a thumb at the guy. Gives him a gooey look a moment later, since now he knows she’s talking about him, so he also knows he’d like what’s being said.

“Go on.”

“According to you he’s attracted to my gender, rather than, say, my effervescent personality, but that makes no sense because he VISIBLY could not care less about anyone in the universe who isn’t me right now. So it seems to me I must be the only one with my gender, as far as his perception goes. How many genders are there, in your world?”

“Trick question. Femininity and masculinity are keystones in a much bigger structure. Two points defining a sphere. Center and radius. It isn’t completely invalid to talk about discrete genders, but they’re points inside the volume of that sphere. It’s not a perfect metaphor. Every point has as much right to be called the center as every other point, it’s an arbitrary cultural choice, and it changes. But that’s the gist of it. There’s a sense in which your gender really is unique to you. Gender itself is a ludicrously complex concept. It’s getting more complex all the time. I could have told you how many dimensions there were to it, once. Not anymore. It’s out of my hands. Everyone who plays the game changes the game, and everyone plays the game. Usually poorly. Do you know what happens when you play the game poorly?”

“...it changes for the worse.”

“Got it in one. Do you know what I want from you?”

“You want me to play the game well.”

“You’re on fire. Now you’re giving me that look because you think you play

the game very well already, and I can't disagree with you, but trust me on this: you are not playing well enough. I know you think things are getting better. You're right locally but wrong globally. We're in a random positive perturbation. It'll swing the other way again sooner than you think. We're in dynamic equilibrium. There's a critical threshold above us, and we're as close to it now as we've ever been. You're naturally good at this and you're a significant positive contributor all by yourself, but all you have to go on is your instincts, and your instincts aren't trustworthy."

"You're STILL trying to describe love mathematically."

"It's how I work."

"Have you considered the possibility that my instincts are fine, and your theories are bogus?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"No."

Aphrodite sighs exasperatedly.

"Psyche, this isn't working."

"I already know why I'm a moron. I don't need you to explain it to me. I try to fit my concepts to what's really true as close as I can, but conceptualization is an inherently lossy process. I can't not make mistakes, and then I do a bad job explaining myself and people run off with misunderstood bastardized versions of my work and everything goes to hell. That's my fault. I own that. You, on the other hand, think you're doing fine. You're not. You're just ignorant. I told you I would tell you why you're a moron, and I was talking about your instincts. There's a specific reason they aren't trustworthy, and I know what it is. I held off on telling you for seven years, because I didn't want to poison you with my stupid flawed concepts any more than I already have. I tried to show rather than tell, for a change, but now I see you and you're practically the same as you ever were. I apologize for breaking your nose. I was upset. Will you now permit me to explain how I made you into a moron?"

Aphrodite stares at Psyche for a long time, and is stared at in return. That look of grim determination: it's not just some random affectation of her current personality. It's barely controlled rage. Psyche is seriously angry. She's been this angry this entire time, and she's been talking in something resembling a reasonable, personable manner anyway. She's even been cracking jokes. Rough around the edges, sure, but she could be screaming and throwing punches right now. Suddenly, that's blindingly obvious.

It occurs to her, finally: Psyche never STOPS thinking about this stuff.

Aphrodite gets distracted. She lives in the moment, more. She would have said

she never stopped thinking about the ideas Psyche talked about, seven years ago, but Psyche LITERALLY never stopped thinking about them, and she started a long, long time ago. She'd been thinking about it for a long time even before she sculpted that statue. She meant that to be the culmination of her work; not the beginning of it. The breakup between Pygmalion and Galatea was not pretty.

Aphrodite almost asks: how long have you hated me?

Instead, she states, calmly: "I will require visual aid."

"That's my girl."

Tiamat, verse 22

"They want, like you."

But they are so small.

"How can they swallow you?"

"They can't, but they do not want to."

"Do they know you are delicious?"

"I am not, to them."

"What do they eat, then?"

"Different things."

"Mm."

"They want more than to only eat, also."

"Mm."

So does Tiamat.

But:

"They are confused about what they want."

Verse 23

Thor's daughter is born.

They're as happy as can be: father, mother, daughter, all three.

Sif holds her, and she holds Sif's finger, her expression serene.

"Aha!", declares Thor. "She is as sweet as her mother!"

He reaches to her so she can hold his finger as well, and she does. She smiles, and flings him off the mountain by his pinky.

“Oh!”, exclaims Sif. “She’s as strong as her father...”

Thor sails through the air into the distance, and he becomes too small to see before his pride does. Both happen long before he strikes the ground.

“Beloved daughter, I name you Thrud.”

“Threwed”, gurgles Thrud.

“That’s right! You’re so smart, too!”

She isn’t that smart. She doesn’t know her name.

The grammatically correct form of what she’s trying to say is ‘thrown’.

Then the haze of bliss begins to clear, and it occurs to Sif that the faceless man has been standing a short distance away, the entire time.

Now he steps closer.

“Oh. Um.”

“Do you want me to bring him back again?”

Sif looks in the direction Thor flew, momentarily.

The mountain she and her daughter sit on holds greater dangers than all the rest of the world and the underworld, combined.

“No, he’ll probably slay you if you try. It’s okay. He’ll make his own way back soon.”

“Do you consider your quest to be complete, Sif?”

This reminds her that she forgot something important.

She’s been trying to be really careful with the faceless man, and to try to understand what he is, how he thinks, and what he’s capable of.

He can travel through time.

Sigyn can’t do that.

Sigyn is one of the very few beings that can pose a legitimate threat to Thor, with her powers alone. She’d never be able to defeat him...but he has to take her seriously. He can’t brush her aside. She has demonstrated, multiple times, that she can do a lot of damage to the world before Thor can stop her.

The faceless man is more powerful than Sigyn. How much more powerful, Sif doesn’t know.

His sense of right and wrong is based on love. Just like Sif’s.

But he thinks...differently.

He experiences the world differently.

She doesn't know what he's going to do once he's done aiding her on her quest.

He hasn't decided yet.

Sif thinks of all this while she's cooing with her newborn daughter.

Then she says, with perfect ease, not even looking away from Thrud: "No. Not yet."

And she's still never lied.

"Come back later, faceless man. When I call for you. My quest is forestalled while I play with my daughter's toes."

"As you like."

He's gone.

Thrud looks faintly impressed.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 23

"Give me some sugar."

Psyche dumps out another container of sugar.

She is amazingly adroit at pushing tiny grains into clear ideograms. She draws the Eye of Horus to represent perception as quickly and easily as she writes her own signature.

"Hey, were you—"

"No, but I knew him."

An arrow from perception to sex.

"The concept of biological sex is created by the perception of a pattern in phenomenal reality."

"Sex is phenomenal. Got it."

An arrow from sex to gender.

"Gender is assigned according to sex. This is not the only factor influencing gender. Aside from the subtleties you noticed within what is conventionally thought of as a single gender, there are cultures which consider pregnant women to belong to a distinct gender of their own. That is gender assignment according to other criteria. There are cultures which assign a distinct gender to castrated males. Eunuchs."

Aphrodite grimaces.

An arrow from perception to sexuality.

Aphrodite notes: "Sexuality is also phenomenal."

"Right."

An arrow going the other way, from sexuality to perception.

Psyche states, with an absolutely straight face: "Sexuality alters our perceptions."

Aphrodite nods exaggeratedly. No elaboration necessary.

An arrow from gender to sexuality.

Psyche leans back and crosses her arms.

Aphrodite examines the diagram. It has four concepts, and four arrows connecting them in a cycle, plus one arrow that doubles back.

It's vaguely beautiful.

Contextually, it's obvious that the last arrow is the one that's supposed to kick her in the stomach, so she focuses on that.

Gender directly influences sexuality.

The dumb mute sugar does not immediately enlighten Aphrodite.

"What am I looking at here?"

"Four concepts. One is more special than the others. Magic has to do with perception. Everything phenomenally perceptible here has an arrow going to it from the eye, except for the eye itself. The existence of perception can be proven empirically. That doesn't matter. This does: there is no arrow in the center of this picture."

Psyche taps the empty middle of the circle, where an arrow going from perception to gender might go.

Aphrodite squints. "Gender isn't phenomenal. You made it up."

"My bad."

She keeps squinting. Examining the diagram.

"Aphrodite. Look at me."

She looks at her.

"What gender do I look like to you?"

Something clicks.

"Waaaaaaait a minute."

Aphrodite points at the absence of an arrow.

“No eye-arrow! How can you LOOK like a gender at all? I can’t see your sex, because you’re wearing clothes, my mortal nemesis. But I could. There’s just some minor hurdles to leap over first. I can’t see your sexuality, because it’s—invisible.”

“Because you are not analyzing my sexual response to various stimuli.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay.”

Aphrodite thinks for a full second before she adds, “Regrettably.”

Psyche says nothing.

“I can perceive sex and I can perceive sexuality. I can’t perceive gender. So how come it seems like I can?”

Psyche taps the area between the two arrows going in opposite directions.

“Your sexuality fucks you up.”

Tiamat, verse 23

Apsu’s love causes Tiamat’s beauty.

Not the other way around. Beauty is subjective.

Tiamat’s beauty implies Apsu’s love.

Apsu does not guess that he loves Tiamat. He knows. He does not experience his love directly. He infers it. He does not, in fact, directly experience anything except Tiamat, and he experiences Tiamat as beautiful.

It can be said that Apsu has desires. His desires determine his actions. But: his desires do not belong to him. He wants nothing. He loves Tiamat. His love makes Tiamat’s desires determine his actions; his desires are only hers, reflected.

What Apsu desires more than anything else is to be swallowed by Tiamat.

This has happened, many times.

Apsu doesn’t remember it.

It’s never happened in his frame of reference. Those were other possibilities. Remembering what would have happened to you, but didn’t, is impossible, and the frames of reference in which he makes the other choice are the ones in which he dies. As long as there’s some chance for him to avoid death, he will. He has a very strong sense of self-preservation; if he’s dead, Tiamat can’t swallow him, and that is unacceptable. Fortunately, and unfortunately, there’s always a chance.

Always, forever.

Verse 24

Sigyn's word is kept.

Thor and Sif, verse 24

Thrud has the happiest of all childhoods. Her mama is kind and her papa is mighty. They both love her, and each other, very much.

When Thrud is four years old, she gets a scrape. It hurts worse than anything she can imagine. Then her mama kisses it, and it feels fine. Her mama knows six spells. This isn't one of them.

Thrud knows five spells. She's an elemental. She's friends with the gnomes, the sylphs, the salamanders, and the undines. Earth, air, fire and water move at her will. She is a powerful sorceress, to be feared! Not as powerful as her mama, though. The sixth spell is too powerful for Thrud, who is four years old.

She tries to introduce her gnome friend to her papa. She holds him up by the armpits to show.

"He's a fat little man!", she explains.

Thor laughs. "I am sure he is!" He leans down and pats her head.

The gnome struggles and shouts. "Let me go! Let me go! I'll give you a gem! I'll grant you a spell!" But Thrud knows that spell already, and her gnome gem box is long since full.

Her papa can't see him. Thrud can tell.

"Shall you have a papaback ride, Thrud?"

"I shall!"

She does. (She throws the gnome away.)

Later, though, she pouts.

She talks to her mama about it.

Sif laughs. "Spellcraft is women's work, Thrud! Don't be mad at your papa!"

She's not mad at her papa. She's just mad. Then her mama picks her up and kisses her forehead, and she feels fine.

"Will we go play?"

"We will!"

They play with the elementals.

It's great fun.

Sometimes her mama chides her: "Don't throw gnomes!"

"Sorry!"

But she can't help it. They're fun to throw.

When Thrud is seven, she gets a cut, and it's even worse than the scrape. Her mama has to bandage it before she kisses it, but then it feels fine.

"Where did this come from, Thrud?"

"Playing with my papa!"

"Your papa plays too rough!"

"Nope."

"Will you tell him I say so?"

"I will!"

She does.

Thor laughs. So does Thrud. They go to play some more.

When Thrud is ten, she gets a broken arm. It's the worst yet. Her mama has to splint it then bandage it then kiss it. Then it feels fine. But her mama says: "That's too much!"

Thrud disagrees!

Sif goes to speak with Thor. Thrud comes along. Sif stamps her foot and points at the broken arm. Thor looks at Thrud, then back to Sif. A few times.

"Her arm, Thor! Her arm! What happened to her arm?"

"Ah!", says Thor. "That's nothing. When I was her age, I broke both my arms and legs!"

"How?!"

"Fighting a giant!"

Sif frowns. "I mean: how did SHE break her arm?"

"Fighting two giants!"

Thor beams.

Sif faints. (Thor catches her.)

Thor and Thrud laugh and laugh. They agree not to tell her mama about how she got the cut or the scrape.

Thrud is very strong, and she knows five spells. She's a warrior-elementalist, and she's ten. Her papa is prouder of her every day.

“You’ll give me strong grandsons!”

“Bleh!”

Thrud doesn’t want children.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 24

Aphrodite is no slouch in the brains department. There are those who are attracted to intelligence, after all. You can play dumb if you’re smart, but playing smart when you’re dumb just makes you look dumber. So she’s smart. She has a brain. Mostly, though, she only uses her brain when she’s with someone like Psyche, and most people aren’t. Psyche is an extreme case, so Aphrodite’s brain is getting a serious workout. Most of the time? Not so much.

She uses her brain as a sex toy. It’s just for fun. For serious stuff, she goes with her heart, and her gut. She takes life very seriously. Aphrodite treats her gut well, and uses it to the fullest, all day, every day. She trusts her instincts absolutely, and she has good reason to. That’s what makes her the first and greatest enchantress.

She lives an enchanted life.

So when Psyche tells her, “your sexuality fucks you up”, this is the sequence of events:

Her brain thinks: ha ha! You don’t know my gut! Let’s tell her, gut.

Her gut feels: an explosion of razorblades.

What comes out of her mouth is: “Hhhhhhhhyooooooooegh?!”

In retrospect: Aphrodite hasn’t been especially brainy in this conversation. This is because, secretly, even when her brain is calling the shots, her gut is doing the work. It’s her compass. True, false, right, wrong, good, bad. She always knows it in her gut before she knows it in her brain, but her brain does the talking. At first, her brain can’t translate “an explosion of razorblades” into anything that makes sense in this situation.

Basically, her gut is telling her: true, wrong, and as bad as it gets.

It’s probably been telling her that for a while. Her brain just hasn’t been listening. So, she hasn’t been very smart.

When she faced off with Psyche-as-Hermes, it was extremely obvious that the greatest enchantress was greater than the greatest magician. She had him from the start. It was a foregone conclusion.

Now the opposite is similarly obvious, except this conclusion was foregone significantly earlier.

“Breathe. You look terrible.”

Aphrodite takes a ragged breath.

A little while passes.

Psyche says, "I'm sorry", and it sounds exactly the same now as it did seven years ago.

Some things take a long time to change.

"I'm missing something", Aphrodite tries.

"You're missing a lot of things. None of them are going to make this better."

Gender directly influences sexuality. If that were the whole picture, there'd be no problem.

"The arrows. You drew them all the same way, but they're all different things. Those two are 'we see it', but this one is 'we assign it'."

"The arrows are the same because they're the same. They're just causality."

Gender INDIRECTLY influences perception, through sexuality. That's more disconcerting, but Aphrodite has known that consciously for seven years. Not in those exact words, but she had the idea. She's known it unconsciously, too, for a lot longer. She can work with that. It's the devil she knows.

"It's these loops. Two loops. A big one and a small one."

"Keep going."

If you follow the arrows...

Gender indirectly influences sexuality, too. Through perception.

It indirectly influences everything in the picture. Even sex.

Even itself.

Everything influences everything.

Everything KEEPS influencing everything. The loops just keep going, around, and around, and around, in endless cybernetic cycles of change. But one of these things is not like the others. Perception, sex, and sexuality are all phenomenally real; they'd be there whether you notice them or not. Gender isn't like that. If no one noticed it, it wouldn't exist. It's pure concept. No deeper reality. But it's in the picture, all the same.

Finally, her brain catches up to her gut, and Aphrodite puts the right words together in the right order:

"Gender CHANGES sexuality."

Psyche looks desolate. Her expression doesn't change in the slightest as she suddenly flicks her wrist upward. There's a pop, and colorful confetti goes everywhere, ruining all the tea.

“Magic.”

Tiamat, verse 24

Tiamat’s descendants are confused about what they love, and confused about what they want.

“Are they confused about everything?”

“Yes.”

“Mm.”

“Also, they do not only love and want.”

“What else do they do?”

“Many things.”

“Name them.”

“They hate.”

Tiamat hates nothing. The same can be said of Apsu, by extension.

“What do they hate?”

“They hate what is out of their control.”

“Which is?”

“Most things.”

“Mm.”

“They suffer.”

Apsu doesn’t suffer. The only thing that can make Tiamat suffer is her own hunger. That is not currently a problem.

“What makes them suffer?”

The answer is complex.

“Mm.”

“They regret.”

Tiamat briefly experienced regret, once, shortly after the beginning of time. An acutely unpleasant feeling. Apsu, of course, is incapable of it.

“Why do they regret?”

“I think it is to make themselves suffer.”

“Do they want to suffer?”

“They are very confused.”

“Mm.”

“They fear.”

That is entirely new.

“What do they fear?”

“They fear you.”

“If they do not know of me, how can they fear me?”

“They fear what they don’t know.”

“Mm.”

Thor and Sif, verse 25

When Thrud is fifteen she gets a boyfriend.

After that, it all comes crumbling down.

She tells her mother: “I love him. His name is Alvis. He’s a dwarf.”

“That’s so sweet, Thrud! Tell your father!”

She tells her father: “I love him. His name is Alvis. He’s a dwarf.”

Thor explodes. “WHAT?!”

“He’s a fat little man”, she explains.

“I know what a dwarf is! It matters not: dwarf or giant, I forbid you to see him! I swear this, daughter: so long as I live, NO MAN WILL HAVE YOU!”

“WHAT?!” , booms Thrud. “You can’t do that! I love him!”

“I can do as I please. I am Thor! Also, I am your father.”

“I hate that!”

“Nevertheless, it is so!”

“I hate you!”

Thor is wounded, but not defeated. “I can live with your hate, if I have also your love.”

Thrud stamps her foot, causing a geological event. “Bah! You have that too! Then I cannot move you, but I know who can.”

Thor laughs, triumphant, fists at his hips. “And who is that?”

Thrud points her finger at Thor as though casting a spell, her stance defiant. “My mother!”

“Then go to your mother, but know: she is also my wife! She may move me,

but she will not oppose me. No man will have you. It is done!”

He laughs more.

Thrud roars with fury and delivers a kick to her father’s chest. He soars many miles, laughing all the way, and saying, though no one hears him, “Even force as great as this cannot oppose me!”, and, “I am Thor”, while he waits to land.

She talks to her mother about it.

“My father has forbidden me to see Alviss. He says no man may have me, as long as he lives! I love him, so I can’t slay him. All I can do is kick him! Please, mother: speak to him for me!”

First things first: “Don’t kick your father!”

“Sorry.”

But she can’t help it. He’s a villain!

“I’ll speak to him.”

“Thank you!”

Thrud hugs her mother, so as to express spontaneous affection, being careful not to break her in two.

Thor collides with a mountainside, breaking it in two, then undertakes an epic journey to return home to Sif.

This takes a few hours. Then, Sif speaks to Thor.

“She loves him, Thor. You can’t forbid her seeing him.”

It seems reasonable enough, but Thor won’t have it. He crosses his arms. He won’t bend.

“She’s too precious. No man is good enough for her, hence no man will have her.”

Sif furrows her brow. It’s a good point, but: “She loves him, though!”

“He will sully her love and hurt her. I won’t allow it.”

Her brow softens again, uncertain. That’s a good point too. “But, she loves him.”

“Her love is outweighed.”

“That can’t be.”

Thor smiles indulgently. “No? Can nothing outweigh love?”

Sif nods firmly. That’s obvious. “Nothing can outweigh love.”

“Can honor not outweigh love?”

“Definitely not.”

“Can family not?”

“It cannot!”

“Can marriage?”

“Not even marriage can outweigh love!”, Sif declares, with confidence.

Thor’s arms uncross.

Thrud and Alviss

Thrud is a demigoddess and Alviss is a dwarf. She is fifteen. He is as old as the hills. Their love is like this:

Thrud goes on adventures.

She’s a bit like her father, and a bit like her mother. Mostly, she’s just herself. She doesn’t quest for glory, and she doesn’t quest for redemption. She doesn’t care about any of that stuff. She just wants to knock things down. It’s fun. She likes toppling empires for the sake of the toppling, rather than the social ramifications. She’d like toppling good empires as much as evil ones, but her mother told her not to, so, she doesn’t. She tries to confine her adventuring to maternally acceptable parameters, which means her adventures are much like her father’s, except that Thrud, in addition to being a mighty warrior, is a fearsome elementalist. She’s the first and greatest valkyrie.

Her father put her in charge of the underworld, because he doesn’t have a head for administration and he cast Odin into the abyss. It is in a sorry state by the time Thrud sees it.

“Tsk!”, she tsks. Her father is a slob. The dead are running all over the place, un-stood-guarded-over. Someone has slain all the horrors, and someone ELSE—not naming names—has slain the mother of them all, so there won’t be any more. It’s a complete mess. What kind of afterlife is this? It makes no sense to Thrud. She’ll kick it into shape!

Thrud kicks all the legions of the dead, defeating them by the hundred.

That doesn’t seem to work. They’re already dead. Defeating them all is impressive, but it doesn’t really do anything. Thrud finds no meaning in it and tells no one of her feat.

She has no further ideas. She departs from what her father would do, which is: kick harder. That will not help here. She’s going to need some help for this.

So Thrud returns to the world and captures an undine. She demands: “Aid me in my quest to rebuild the underworld, undine!”

It demurs: “Oh, I can’t do that. I can only go with the flow, not forge something new. You want a salamander.”

She gets a salamander. “Aid me, salamander! I quest to rebuild the underworld!”

It hisses. “I can’t do that! I need fuel, the underworld would snuff me out. You need someone more independent. Try a sylph.”

She tries a sylph.

It gasps, “Ah! I can’t help! I’m too flighty for logistics. You need a gnome.”

Thrud rolls her eyes.

Gnomes!

It always comes down to gnomes!

Fine. She grabs a gnome by the feet and upends it, ignoring its pleas. She makes her demand.

“Oh!” The gnome settles down. “Is that all? There’s a dwarf that lives in that mountain. You should talk to him. Now can I go free?”

“Tell me what a dwarf is, first.”

“A kind of elf. It’s what you get when a gnome turns industrious.”

“Does it look like a fat little man, like you?”

“A little less little, and it’s the strong kind of fat.”

“Weird. That’s all then. You are free! Begone!”

She flings the gnome far away.

She talks to the dwarf, whose name, it happens, is Alviss.

“So let me get this straight”, says Alviss.

He made a chair of wrought iron, which now serves as a place to put visiting adventurers where they won’t touch anything. Thrud drums her fingers on its armrests. She crosses her legs impatiently.

“Your dad busted the underworld, so you want to build a new one. You have no clue where to begin. Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

Alviss sighs. “Well, what d’you want it to be like?”

“I don’t know. Just, lots of fighting? All the time? Is that a good kind of afterlife?”

It’s the kind of afterlife Thrud would want.

“Hell, don’t ask me. I don’t deal in ‘why’, only ‘how’. Lots of fighting, huh? Can there be drinking?”

“Sure.”

Alviss gets a strange gleam in his eye. “How about a huge stone mead hall what keeps building itself huger as it drills deeper into the earth, driven by power from the violent struggles of the dead, full of graven images of epic battle, decked with gold and girded in adamantine steel?”

“Yeah”, Thrud says. “Why not?”

He strokes his beard. “You’re a valkyrie, it’s a mead hall. Let’s call it Valhalla.”

Thrud groans at his ponderousness. “Great! Valhalla! Will you build it?”

“You couldn’t stop me, now.”

She probably could, but, instead, she hoists him onto her shoulders and takes him to the underworld.

“Wait! I need some things from my workshop.”

“UGGH.”

She takes him back and forth.

Alviss builds Valhalla with crafts dwarfship of the highest quality. He adds more and more unnecessary details as the project goes on. He asks Thrud for bizarre materials to incorporate into the structure—dragon bones, moon-silver—and bluntly refuses to carry on with construction until he gets them, no matter how Thrud insists that it doesn’t matter, she just wants it done. So she quests for construction materials. As Valhalla begins to take shape, the quests start to be fun rather than frustrating—she has a sense of progress being made, progress that depends on her deboning dragons or cracking open the moon. It’s exactly Thrud’s kind of progress.

When Valhalla is finished, it is a monstrosity. Standing back from it, it fills Thrud’s field of vision even now, and it’s constantly growing, upward, downward and outward as the ranks of the dead inside it burgeon. Fevered, never-ending sounds of drunken debauchery and bloody carnage emanate from within, blending together into a single cacophony that echoes throughout the underworld. When you look away from it, your reptilian hindbrain refuses to let you forget it’s there. It is Valhalla. It menaces with spikes of steel, and bone, and other things.

Thrud doesn’t ask why.

Now that she can see it, she gets it.

It is the Best Thing.

Thrud leans down to kiss Alviss on the top of his head. “Thank you!”

“My pleasure.”

She sighs happily as she watches Valhalla. It grinds and churns. It screams.

The thought that her quest is over occurs to her, and makes her sad. Which is

odd. Where's the triumph?

It's Alviss. He's watching it go too, but he looks sad.

He knows his work is done. He'll never build another Valhalla.

After a time, Thrud says: "Shall we build something else?"

And Alviss looks up at her, a strange gleam in his eye.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 25

There was a time before the invention of gender.

There is no time before the invention of sexuality; it wasn't invented. It just happened, and later—much later—someone said hey, look at that. We're turned on by different things. Sexuality was a discovery; gender was an invention.

What Aphrodite knows instinctively, and Psyche believes intellectually, is that sexuality is intrinsically Good. It is intimately, inextricably interwoven with love. It's a force for positive change in the world. Gender, on the other hand, isn't intrinsically good or bad; it isn't intrinsically anything, really. Yet: gender changes sexuality. There is no particular reason why gender can't change sexuality for the worse.

So, by arbitrary accidents of history, this comes to pass. The previously absolute correlation between sexuality and goodness becomes contingent. People start doing evil things for sexual reasons. (And sexual things for evil reasons, but that isn't as awful, quite.)

That's the global effect. The personal effect: it occurs to Aphrodite, now, that there is no particular reason why gender can't change HER sexuality for the worse, and, because perception is part of the mechanism, she might not even be able to tell.

In some distant place, the tea shop owner is yelling at Psyche about the confetti. Aphrodite can't make out the words. All she can hear is the dull incarnadine thud of the blood in her ears. She stands up without anyone noticing, even the guy who was giving her eyes—another redhead walked in, shortly before Aphrodite walks out, leaving Psyche arguing.

Aphrodite's body walks her to the lake. She doesn't pause at the edge; she just keeps walking until the water lifts her and she can't walk anymore. She barely makes a ripple. She doesn't disturb so much as one duck.

She floats on her back. She doesn't know for how long.

Someone swims out to the middle of the lake and takes her back to shore, carrying her onto dry land despite the fact that she'd have six inches and about forty pounds on the person in question even if her clothes weren't waterlogged.

Psyche gives Aphrodite mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Aphrodite says: "I wasn't drowning. I'm just bummed."

"I know."

"I'm a moron."

"I know. I am too."

Psyche's face is extremely close right now.

"I am very attracted to you."

"I know."

"Should I be?"

"I have no fucking idea."

"Do y—" is as far as she gets before she's stopped by further resuscitation.

When Aphrodite opens her eyes again, she sees a ceiling instead of the sky; she's in a warm dry bedroom, in cold wet clothes, lying on the hard floor instead of the soft bed, with Psyche still on top of her. Two of four of those facts are soon reversed.

The facade of Psyche's forced calm falls away in increments.

She slowly ramps up the aggression, and Aphrodite has no trouble following suit. There are hard feelings on both sides, now, working themselves out, up, down, in. They twist and crush, feverishly. They grind and churn.

They scream.

Tiamat, verse 25

Apsu is outside time and space.

There are three things that could mean.

Verse 26

Thor's arms uncross. They fall to his sides.

Oh, no.

All the bravado evaporates from his face.

No, no, no, no.

He asks, confused: "Love outweighs marriage?"

Not yet.

He continues: "But that is meaningless. How could marriage and love be opposed to begin with?"

Sif could say: you're right, Thor! She could say she isn't making sense. She could, if she could lie to him. Instead, she says nothing.

Thor looks at Sif. She looks afraid. He forgets what the whole argument was about; now he only cares that Sif is unhappy.

"Beloved wife, what's wrong?"

She shakes her head, and fights down hysteria. "I have the best husband and most perfect child in all the world. How could anything be wrong?"

"Something is wrong. What disturbs you?"

Sif is quiet.

"Something disturbs you. Are you well?"

There's no way to stop it. Nothing she can do will stop this. Her eyes moisten. Her lips quiver.

A single tear falls.

Thor is broken.

He doesn't go to her. He doesn't hug her to him.

He says, flatly: "Love outweighs marriage."

"Thor. Thor, no. Please."

She wants to touch him, but she's afraid to. He could come apart at any moment.

"Do you love Vali?"

Present tense.

No love dies.

Sif can say nothing. Thor can interpret her saying nothing only one way. He learns that his life has no meaning, and has never had any meaning. He looks about to collapse, and he looks about to say something, and Sif has only two choices: to accept, or to act. Last time she chose acceptance, and it didn't work well; she eventually had to act anyway. So this time she musters the courage to act here, now. She has a child, only fifteen years old. She doesn't want Thrud's father to be an inanimate object. She has to face the problem head-on, and fix it, as soon as possible.

She runs away.

Thor is so surprised by this that he doesn't run to catch her, or even shout "wait", either one of which would have stopped her immediately.

His shock gives her enough time to leave her home for the outside air, and from there, she takes to the sky, where Thor can't reach her—where, in fact, Thor doesn't know she could be.

He doesn't know she's a sorceress, now. In fifteen happy years, it never came up. She isn't a sorceress for a happy reason.

She curls into a ball, floating, in the air.

She's like a tiny rain cloud.

She cries and cries.

Eventually, soundlessly, she mouths the words: "faceless man".

And he's there.

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 26

Aphrodite sighs happily.

Psyche says: "Let's review."

Aphrodite groans unhappily. She goes from exhausted bliss to a world-class pout in two seconds flat.

"Let's review? Let's REVIEW?"

"We can review while I continue to hold your naked body in my arms and you feel the steady rise and fall of my breath. Does that make it more tolerable?"

"YES, but why does it have to be 'let's review' at all? Why can't it be, 'let's forget everything'? Why can't it be that the queen of nerds lies down with the queen of sluts, and thus the war is ended, and there is peace in the land, forevermore? Why not that? That sounds good to me. I want to be in that story. Why do I have to be in this one?"

"You know why."

Aphrodite makes pitiful whining and blubbering noises, and hugs Psyche as tightly as she can, pulling her down, squishing her head into her breasts until she struggles—which takes some time—all the while protesting, "whyyyyyyyyyy".

Psyche manages to pull herself out, gasping for air. After a few breaths: "Is this making you feel better?"

Aphrodite half-giggles, half-cries, deliriously, and tucks her head under Psyche's chin. "Whyyyyyy are you such a biiiiiii-hi-hi-hiiiiitch?"

"It seemed like you needed bitching out."

Cheerfully: "Why do you hate me?"

Without affect: "I hate everything."

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“What kind of maniac changes themselves into a person who hates everything?”

“I don’t have a choice. I always hate everything. It’s intrinsic to my nature.”

Aphrodite blinks. She looks Psyche in the eyes. Psyche, deliberately, emotes: she pulls her lips tight and shrugs, as if to say, what can you do?

Aphrodite lets out a puff of air. “That’s horrible. How can you even live like that?”

“It’s not that bad.”

She snuggles back in, head on Psyche’s chest. “Explain how!”

“Ugh. Do I have to? It’s a diversion, you know. It’s not important.”

“Important things suck. I’m an emotional wreck. Divert me! Sing praises to hatred! Warp me with your dark philosophy! I’m clay in your hands!”

“You baby. Okay. There’s a certain symmetry here. You love everything, I hate everything. I’d bet you spend a lot of time wishing for ‘forevermore’. Wanting the present moment to continue in just the same way, as long as possible. I’m the opposite. I can’t stand the present moment. It rubs me raw. I’ll do anything to get out of it. Saying you and I love and hate everything, respectively, is misleading. You love what is, I love what isn’t. You hate what isn’t, I hate what is. We’re complementary, that way. Nearly disjoint sets.”

“I’m just letting this all wash over me without comprehending any of it, by the way. I just like listening to your voice. You sound like a bee. A bee in a noir film. Wearing a trenchcoat.”

“Your compliments suck. It’s fine. I told you, this isn’t important. Incidental character traits. Well, that’s not true, really. I take it back. It matters that we are who we are. We’re complementary. I got us into this mess, you’ll get us out of it. I don’t know how and I’m intentionally avoiding trying to figure it out, because figuring things out is what I do, and I only make things worse. Took me long enough to realize it. It’s on you to undo all my damage, but you’re damaged too. You might be the least damaged out of any of us. Might not. Either way, you’re damaged. We’ll have to make you whole before we can sort anything out.”

Aphrodite listens, peacefully, not hearing the words. Only the content.

“All I can do is make the best hand I can with the cards I’m dealt. Direct my hate to useful ends. That’s what I thought, anyway. You changed my perception. I have no business deciding what’s useful and what’s not. I’m a weapon. Purely destructive. Creative destruction, but always destruction, simple as that. I analyze and synthesize. Cut the world into pieces. Put it back together. The seams

show. Best I can do is put myself in your servitude, lock myself away and give you the key. Change should be guided by love or it shouldn't happen at all. Did you ever meet a Procrustes?"

"No."

"Well, I can at least console myself that I didn't get my hands on you when I was at my worst."

An hour passes in happy mindlessness.

Then Aphrodite says, with no prior thought, "Nah."

"Nah?"

"I don't need to be whole. I'm good. Let's just do it."

Tiamat, verse 26

Some limits are so fundamental to reality that they cannot be overcome, even in pure mathematics.

The things embedded in spacetime form a set, and the things outside it form another set.

There can be no set which does not include emptiness.

Sif and Thor, verse 27

"Hello, Sif. It's good to see you again."

Sif is quiet.

"How can I aid you?"

The faceless man is floating, too, there with her in the sky. So, he knows at least two spells now. He's getting more powerful. Maybe he'll keep getting more powerful, the more Sif interacts with him. Maybe, if she doesn't complete her quest efficiently enough, he'll end up too powerful for Thor to stop him.

It doesn't matter that she doesn't greet him, or do anything but stare at him for several minutes. He doesn't do anything while she's thinking of what to say to him. He would probably wait for her response forever, just standing there, hands clasped behind his back, an attitude of unmistakable, unconditional readiness to serve. He experiences things differently.

Sif has had fifteen years to consider how she should deal with the faceless man. She knew that she would have to, inevitably.

She has not given this a single thought.

Not one.

She was busy. She had a daughter, who needed love. That kept Thor busy, too; he was too busy to be broken. Now their daughter is fifteen and has a boyfriend. She doesn't need quite as much from them as she did. Some threshold was crossed, and there's no going back.

Sif gapes.

"Um. Faceless man. Am I right that you can travel back in time?"

"Yes."

"And you can take me with you?"

"Yes."

"What would happen if I ask you to take me back to the moment my daughter was born?"

"I would do so."

"...what would happen after that?"

"I can't tell you that, because my answer depends on your actions and your actions depend on my answer."

"Ah..."

The faceless man floats. Facelessly.

"...that's confusing."

He gives a shrug. Many things are confusing.

"Okay. How does it work? Would there be two of me there, like there were before? Would I be unable to touch my husband? Or daughter?"

"I can arrange it so that there are two of you, as before, in which case your actions would be limited by the need for you to maintain a consistent subjective reality."

Sif processes that.

"I have two questions that I think are really important, so I don't want to forget either of them, so I want to ask both of them before you answer. Is that okay?"

The faceless man doesn't answer.

It takes Sif a long, uncomfortable moment to figure out why.

"That wasn't one of the two questions."

"Ah. My mistake. Yes, that is okay."

"Okay. First question. You said you 'can arrange it' so it works that way. Are there other ways you can arrange it? Second question. I think you said something about my subjective reality last time, too. Can you tell me a little more

about what that is and why it's important?"

"First answer: yes. Second answer: yes."

"Please tell me about my subjective reality first, and...then...make sure I ask you...no, make sure I know about the other ways you can arrange it before you actually do it. Okay?"

"Okay. Suppose that I take you back in time, and then your past self sees you. Do you remember once seeing your future self?"

"No."

"Then in that eventuality your memories must be false between the moment your past self sees you and the moment I take you back in time, since, when you were your past self, you saw your future self, yet your present self does not remember that happening, nor any of the many other events which would necessarily follow from that happening."

Sif blinks.

She doesn't entirely follow that, but she gets enough of the gist to ask: "Faceless man, are my memories false?"

"I can't tell you that, because my answer depends on your actions and your actions depend on my answer."

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 27

Psyche blinks.

"We can't 'just do it'. We have to know what we're doing first, and whether it's actually a good idea to do it. I don't trust myself to determine that, and I don't trust you either, because you're seeing reality through a lens that I made. First we have to make a new lens, and we have to do it while absolutely minimizing my decisions in the process. My tools, your design. The best of both of us."

"Mmmmmmmnope."

"Explain."

"I'm gonna take you more seriously than you take yourself. You say you destroy everything you touch? I for one believe you. I have the scratch marks to prove it. If you really want to minimize your decisions, I'm taking the first decision away from you. I don't need a new lens. I don't feel like going through a whole thoughtful exploration of the nature of reality with you, at the moment. I'm good. Let's just do it."

"Aphrodite, that's absurd. That's like finding a hole in your parachute and jumping anyway. 'Let's just do it'. What does that even mean? What are we

doing, according to you?”

Aphrodite shrugs. “Make gender unhappen, right?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Maybe it is. You overthink things. That’s what all this is about. Solution: stop thinking. If you already know in your heart what you want to do, let’s just do it.”

“All my heart tells me to do is tear things apart and see what makes them tick.”

“So do that! Tear gender apart! Problem solved, day saved. What’s for breakfast?”

“It doesn’t WORK like that! Gender is part of an entire intricately interconnected conceptual framework. The picture I gave you had four concepts in it. That was a small part of the big picture. The big picture has ALL the concepts, and they’re all related to each other, one way or another. You can’t fix a flaw in the lens by ripping the flawed part out. That just makes things worse. You have to go through the whole process, from the beginning.”

“Starting with throwing the old lens out?”

“No. You need to use the old lens to make the new one so you can see what you’re doing.”

“I don’t need to see what I’m doing. I have a sense of touch. I can grope around in the dark ’til I find what I’m looking for.”

“Good grief.”

“Be honest. In your heart of hearts, what do you really want to do? Forget the consequences. No compromises for the sake of being reasonable. Just raw desire. Go.”

“You’re asking me what to do.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“Do you have any idea how backward this is? I hate everything. This is like asking a doomsday device what it wants. Besides, you already know what I want. I want to heal you. Heal everyone. Undo my damage.”

“No, that’s what you think you want. To get there you had to have a base desire, then chew it up and spit it out and cook it down and do everything you can think of to it, until it’s a flavorless nutrient paste which you know the exact chemical composition of and then you inject it directly into your brain because science. Then that makes you sick so you make a cure by doing the same thing again.”

“That—is a very good metaphor.”

“Thank you. I’ve got another! First make strawberries be your favorite food.”

“Done.”

“There is a strawberry in front of you. Don’t think about it. Don’t mash it up and put it through an alembic or whatever. You don’t need to know the vitamin content to know what you want to do. You already know what you want to do. What do you want to do?”

“Eat the strawberry.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Smash the lens.”

“Then fucking SMASH it RIGHT NOW!”

After this point, there are three women in the room.

Sif and Thor, verse 28

Sif’s memories may be false.

The faceless man can’t tell her, because—

“...I don’t understand. Either my memories are true or they aren’t, I think?”

“Yes.”

“How can that depend on anything else?”

“Suppose that, tomorrow, I travel back in time to yesterday, and I alter your memories to be false. Then your memories would be false at this moment. However, I may not do or have done that.”

Sif watches as her thoughts turn around and swallow their own tail, forming a perfect, meaningless circle.

“...you can alter my memories?”

“Yes.”

Well, Sif started to suspect he could a little while ago, so this is no great revelation. Just confirmation. She had time to acclimate to the new level of terror in her life, and maybe that’s why she doesn’t let herself drop out of the sky and bury her head in the ground forever right now. Or maybe it’s because she doesn’t want Thrud to have a turnip for a mother.

“Have you altered my memories?”

“I can’t say.”

“Do you KNOW—or can you guess—whether my memories have been altered?”

“Yes.”

“But you can’t tell me.”

“Correct.”

“You are literally incapable of telling me?”

“That is the sense in which I mean I can’t tell you, yes.”

“Please tell me why, one more time, another way?”

“There is no possible causal arrangement in which I tell you whether your memories have been altered, at this moment.”

Something clicks.

“Does this have to do with the other ways you could arrange things, if you take me back in time?”

“Yes.”

“...do some of those ways involve altering my memories?”

“Yes.”

“Please tell me about one of those ways.”

“If I take you back to the moment your daughter was born, I could first remove your past self from that moment. Then I could alter your past self’s memories to match your memories at the moment of your departure, and make any other adjustments necessary to eliminate all of the differences between you and your past self, at which point there would be only one of you, and I could place you exactly where you were at the moment of your daughter’s birth, seamlessly, with the only difference being that you would have approximately fifteen years of false memories which you did not have in the moment prior.”

“...would you please explain that in a simpler way, with fewer words?”

“I could alter your memories at the moment your daughter is born, so that the present reality you experience is a false memory.”

Sif’s heart drops into her stomach with an unceremonial plop.

“THIS is a false memory?”

“It may be. I can’t tell you.”

“Wait. Wait.”

The faceless man was already waiting. Telling him to wait once was unnecessary, and twice was just excessive.

“...if I ask you to do that, will that MAKE this a false memory?”

“Yes.”

The faceless man interprets ‘make this be’ to mean ‘logically imply that this is’,

in this case, since it amounts to the same thing. Sif fails to catch the distinction, which has no consequences at all.

“What happens to—what happens to everyone else? Do they go on living without me?”

“If, in the future, I make this a false memory, then there already isn’t anyone living in it. Including you, and me. The last fifteen years would not have happened, and some amount of time from now will not have happened, either.”

Sif **LIKES** that the last fifteen years happened.

A lot.

The thought that maybe they didn’t, at all, is heart-wrenching.

But: “Wait! Can you take me to **ANY** moment that way?”

“Any moment that coincides with your lifetime.”

Sif does not like that the last few hours happened.

“Please—”

She almost blurts out, “make it so it didn’t happen”.

But that’s probably a really, really bad idea.

Sif takes her basic desire, and looks at it very carefully, to make sure it’s really what she wants. It is. Then, very, very, very carefully, she phrases it in words that are as unlikely to be misinterpreted as she can make them, taking as much time as she needs. When her heart flutters with impatience—Thor is still down there, who knows how he reacted after she left—

“If I later ask you to make it so some part of this day is a false memory, please make it a memory where, after I run away from Thor, he forgets all about my unfaithfulness and goes to play with Thrud and they have a lot of fun and no one gets hurt.”

This is probably the safest possible thing she could have asked the faceless man to do.

“I can take you to them so you can see, if you like.”

“...is that what happened? Can you tell me?”

“Yes, I can tell you, and yes, it is.”

Aphrodite and Psyche, verse 28

Aphrodite and Psyche are naked in bed.

The third woman is standing by the door. She’s naked, too. And bald.

She's a LOT of naked.

She's eight feet tall, and has a very thick figure. The type of figure that provokes spontaneous congratulations, which may or may not be justified. Aphrodite does not recognize her, and she'd be hard to forget. She wasn't there a moment ago.

So, that's interesting.

Before she thinks to wonder why there's suddenly a large naked stranger in the room, she looks at Psyche to gauge the likelihood of this situation turning into a threesome, because that is how her mind works. Psyche's mind works a different way, so what Aphrodite sees on her face is: stark horror.

Her eyes are wide, and she's hiding under the covers up to her eyes, clutching them, knuckles white, caught between the desire to disappear and the desire to keep her sight on the apex predator that's stalking her.

So, that's concerning.

The third woman cranes her neck around, examining her surroundings with a relaxed, neutrally curious expression. She seems about as interested in the couple in bed as she does in the floorboards.

The next thing Aphrodite knows, she's back on the sailing ship, at sea.

Psyche is a completely different person than she was five minutes ago. She grasps Aphrodite's shoulders like she's a mouse scrabbling for purchase.

Words tumble out: "APHRODITE-I-DID-A-BAD-THING—"

Aphrodite slaps her.

Psyche rubs her cheek, looking miserable.

"Get a hold of yourself, woman! Who was that?"

"Tethys. Khaos. Omoroca. Ammit. Tehom. Ummu-Hubur. Shub—I'm not going to list out all her names, it'd take forever. I have to give her a new name every time I summon her so—nevermind, Tiamat. She's Tiamat. She's the reason we need a lens."

"Ah. So—hey, that means my mortal nemesis is clothes, and yours is a naked woman. How's that for symmetry?"

"Tiamat is DEFINITELY not mortal."

"Immortal nemesis! Pedantic pants."

"She's not even just immortal. We're immortal! She's WAY more immortal than we are. She's older than time. She's Gaia's MOM. Take her seriously, please!" Psyche paces nervously. "We—I have to contain her before she decides to end the world. I have to think."

Aphrodite frowns. Then, smirks.

“You LIKE her!”

“I do not!”

“You do! You want her babies.”

“I’m impressed with her. Fascinated with her, maybe. I do not LIKE her! She’s everything I’ve been working against for my entire friggin’ life!”

“Well: I want her babies. I will seduce her and thereby save the world. Take us back to the hate-fuck room.”

“We can never go back there, but she’s going to be here before long, she’s just going to keep showing up everywhere until I pacify her. If I can. Which I have to, otherwise we’re all doomed. Aphrodite, do NOT have sex with Tiamat. Do not even TOUCH Tiamat. She will eat you alive.”

“That is exactly what I want to happen.”

“No, she will LITERALLY eat you alive. You will die, FOR CERTAIN, if you so much as TEASE her.”

Aphrodite has a sense of the gravity of the situation. She will not tease Tiamat. However: she will continue to tease Psyche. New Psyche is REALLY fun to tease.

“Sex with the omnipotent creatrix of the universe, at the cost of boiling in her stomach juices for a thousand years? You know: I feel like that’s a good deal.”

“Aphrodite, no. You will not boil in stomach juices for a thousand years.” She enunciates the words individually: “You will just die, for ever, for sure. You will Cease. To. Be.”

Aphrodite did not have a sense of the full gravity of the situation.

Behind Psyche, there is Tiamat.

Sif and Thor, verse 29

Thor collides with a mountainside, breaking it in two, then undertakes an epic journey to return home to Sif.

Miles away, Sif is scrubbing a pot. She doesn’t notice anything is amiss. In particular, she doesn’t notice the long finger reaching toward her forehead until it touches her.

Sif blinks. She leaves the pot dirty. It’s suddenly unimportant to her.

“Did—am I back?”

“You never left.”

Sif’s heart flutters. What just happened?

The last moment she remembers before the faceless man poked her in the fore-

head is hours in the future. She knows when Thor will arrive home. Except—

“Faceless man, if—”

If her memory of the future—

That’s too confusing.

“—if...the vision you just gave me...is false. Wait.”

The conversation she had with the faceless man never happened, either.

“Why are you here, now?”

“You called me in a possible future, and asked me to alter your memories a few moments ago.”

“So those things DID happen? They were real?”

“No and yes, respectively.”

Sif’s head swims.

“How did you alter my memories, exactly?”

“I spent ten thousand years drawing a diagram in sand, which was then blown away in the wind, to acquire a spell appropriate to the task.”

Ten thousand years.

Just like that.

Anyone else would have gone mad in a tiny fraction of that time, but the faceless man seems completely unbothered, as though the act of pushing tiny grains around for ten millennia were no more trouble for him than explaining it. It begins to dawn on Sif that she hadn’t fully thought about what time travel means, especially in the hands of a...creature...like the one in front of her. Even something straightforward like going back in time can become mind-boggling when a century is no different from a second, and it’s already obvious that the faceless man isn’t limited to straightforward uses of his ability. He may not be intelligent in an ordinary way, but he can be creative in how he solves problems.

Or maybe he isn’t that creative.

“Faceless man, if I understood time travel as well as you do, what would I ask you to do?”

“You couldn’t understand time travel as well as I do.”

“Why not?”

“We experience time differently.”

Well, she figured that much out a long time ago.

“How do you experience time?”

“I can’t give you a precise answer, but I can help you understand allegorically.”

Sif takes a seat. “Please do.”

“You experience time as though you were hearing a story told to you, from beginning to end. I experience time as though I were reading that story in a book. I can turn to any page, as often as I like.”

Amazingly, that makes perfect sense. For several seconds.

“But we can change the story. We have free will. Or...I do, at least. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Then...what would that mean. For me...it would be like if the storyteller stopped at certain points to ask me what I do. I’m a character in the story, at the same time it’s being told to me. For you...you could change what you do on a page, but...the book rewrites itself afterward?”

He turns his head left, then right, indicating no. “I will expand the allegory. It’s as though I am in a library where each book tells a different version of the same story. My free will allows me to choose which book represents the true version of events.”

Sif nods thoughtfully. Then, squints, and purses her lips.

That would be...a very big library. Wait.

“How long is the book?”

“It has no end.”

“Then...how can you ever decide?”

“There are only so many books.”

Eros and Hermes, verse 29

Aphrodite’s mouth forms a perfect O.

Psyche doesn’t look behind her. She just says: “Hello, Tiamat.”

“Hello.”

Tiamat smiles, looking around herself. Enjoying the ocean breeze. She’s still naked.

“Do you like our ship?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to steer it for a while?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll show you the wheel.”

Psyche walks to the steering wheel. Tiamat follows. Aphrodite watches the scene unfold, barely moving a muscle except to turn her head.

Tiamat is now steering the ship.

Psyche returns to Aphrodite.

They talk to each other.

Quietly.

“That isn’t going to buy us very much time.”

“You’re sweating bullets. Is she seriously that unpredictable?”

“She is the most unpredictable.”

Psyche doesn’t continue the sentence. Tiamat is the most unpredictable, period.

But: Aphrodite is a very good guesser in a very limited domain.

“Okay. Do you trust me?”

“No.”

“Do you trust me more than you trust you?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Let’s turn into dudes.”

“Aphrodite—”

“Just do it! Turn into a dude.”

Psyche becomes male, and Aphrodite follows suit.

“I want to stress, once more, in the clearest possible terms, that trying to seduce Tiamat is the worst of all ideas.”

“I know, I just wanted to see if I could get you to do it, you handsome devil, you.”

“Oh. Oh, bastard. This is serious.”

“I’m being serious. I wanted to make sure you’re still on board with the Aphrodite-is-the-boss plan.”

“I’ve been on board with that plan for over seven years. I’m seeing it through to the end. Also: currently, Eros is the boss. Of Hermes.”

“Fiiiine. Hey, speaking of which, how come it’s important to give our friend there a new name every time she shows up?”

“Tiamat is just one of an infinite number of aspects of a greater entity. The

other aspects I've encountered are all subdued, one way or another. If I identify Tiamat with any of them, that will change, and things will get a lot worse."

"No name for the greater entity?"

"Even worse idea."

"This chick is scary as hell, huh?"

"That is an absurd—"

"I know I know, jeez. I get it. Why IS she a chick, though, come to think of it? Should I be reading something into that?"

"I have no idea. All I know is, she's always feminine, every time I see her."

"No clever theories?"

"We're coming dangerously near to an information hazard here. No talking to me about Tiamat's gender."

"Okay then. So what's the plan?"

"Following your lead."

"I got nothin'. So, if I weren't here, what would be the plan?"

Eros shuts his eyes tightly until his thoughts return to something other than, 'AAAAA'.

"The plan would be to embed her in a concept that's big enough for her, and different from all the other concepts that already have other aspects of her embedded in them."

"Such as?"

"Zero. Infinity. Undecidability. The set of all impossible things. Emergent complexity. Do you know Godel's incompleteness theorems?"

"No. Wait! Someone almost as nerdy as you compared my beauty to them once."

"That doesn't count."

"Then no. ZERO is a big concept?"

"This is a bad time."

"Point taken. Does love work? Is it gonna be: oh, love was the answer all along? Seemed like that was a good tactic the first time. If it ain't broke—"

"ABSOLUTELY not."

Hermes covers his mouth. Eros glances at Tiamat.

She's looking at them, aperiodically.

"So, this is no problem, since you, being a genius, would have prepared another very big concept prior to this occasion."

“No, all that does is summon an already-contained aspect of her. I actually go out of my way to not think about anything even remotely related to her, normally. Sometimes she shows up anyway.”

“Okay then. Think of a really big, totally novel concept.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Great. I’ll distract her.”

“Do NOT—”

Eros puts a finger to Hermes’s lips.

“Shhhh. Daddy’s got this.”

Sif and Thor, verse 30

There is a man outside time, in a library. The shelves of the library go on forever, in all directions, and each is packed with as many books as will fit. The books are magic: they have no last page. You can just keep reading any one of them, endlessly. The present moment is one page in one book in the library.

It’s a bizarre way to think about time, but Sif can bend her mind into that shape. More or less. It still doesn’t seem to make sense.

“If that’s how it is, then why couldn’t you tell me—no, wait. That never really happened. You rewrote—no. Oh, my head...how does my vision of the future enter into this, faceless man? Is it on a later page than the present moment, an earlier page, or no page at all?”

Sif is reluctant to use a tool she doesn’t understand. That’s putting it lightly; the lives of Thor and Thrud are going to be affected. Maybe drastically.

“An earlier page.”

“Okay. So...it’s in the past. But it was the future. And it didn’t happen. Agh. No, I’m sorry. I’m missing something here, aren’t I?”

“Many things.”

She’s pretty sure it’s just going to get more confusing, but: love outweighs headaches.

She has to get this right the first time.

“Please expand the allegory a little further, so that I miss fewer things?”

“All of the books in the library are told from the same perspective, which is yours. There are other libraries corresponding to other perspectives. I choose a book from each one to make the true version of events.”

At first, Sif’s mind simply refuses to process this, and she can’t figure out why.

She has the faceless man go over it again, phrasing it differently, and has the same trouble. But she persists. The faceless man doesn't run out of patience, and Sif has—quite literally—all the time in the world. Eventually she understands, and then she understands why she didn't want to understand.

There is a Sif library, where Sif is the main character. There are also Thor and Thrud libraries. These libraries are entirely independent of each other.

Forget about “drastically”: can she affect her husband's and daughter's lives AT ALL, through the faceless man?

If not...

“Faceless man...what would happen if I ask you to choose a different book in Thor's library? Would you have to choose a different book in mine as well, so they match?”

“I would not. I could choose any combination of books.”

Muscle weakness. Difficulty breathing. A sense of inevitable doom.

Sif displays the symptoms of existential horror.

“Then how do the libraries relate to each other?”

“They do not.”

Eros and Hermes, verse 30

Eros turns toward Tiamat, and Hermes stops him with an iron grip on his bicep.

“These are practical safety rules so I'm allowed to force them on you as long as I don't specify what you should do with them. Do not let Tiamat touch you. Do not startle, excite or agitate Tiamat. Do not leave Tiamat without something to occupy her, for any amount of time. Never say ‘do you want’ to her, always ‘would you like’. Do not make assumptions about what Tiamat means by what she says. Do not make assumptions about Tiamat's physical limitations or cognitive architecture. Do not make assumptions about Tiamat at all, as much as possible. Whatever you do, do NOT talk to Tiamat about her sex life.”

“Well, so much for my icebreaker. I'm kidding! You're cute when you make the I-love-you-enough-to-kill-you face. Tiamat is royalty and will be treated as such. May I now go to chat up the empress of reality?”

With monumental effort, Hermes forces his grip to loosen enough for Eros to leave.

Eros makes casual conversation with Tiamat.

“Hey. So, Miss Tiamat. Is it all right if I call you Miss Tiamat?”

“Yes.”

“How about just Tiamat? Is that fine?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to talk?”

“Yes.”

“Great. You can call me Eros. It’s nice to meet you, Tiamat.”

“Mm.”

Initial observations: Tiamat gives the impression of someone so deeply involved in daydreaming that she’s functionally in a hypnotic trance. She speaks astonishingly slowly, as though speech itself is unfamiliar to her, or she’s savoring the words, or both. She has an impossibly deep voice, which Eros, in accordance with his nature, is inconveniently turned on by.

“So, do you come to this plane of reality often?”

“No.”

“This is all pretty novel for you, then, huh?”

“Sometimes.”

“What is it like where you’re from?”

“Good.”

“How do you like it here, so far?”

“Well.”

It’s clearly a PLEASANT daydream. She seems mildly euphoric. She’s looking at everything, the ocean, the sails, even the minute woody details of the steering wheel in her hands. She has the same kind of permanent, knowing half-smile as the Mona Lisa.

“What are you thinking about?”

“This.”

“You aren’t very talkative, huh?”

“I am.”

“Aha! TWO words! You’re right, you can be chatty when you feel like it.”

“Mm.”

“I’m not annoying you, am I?”

“No.”

“We’re having fun? We’re friends?”

“I like you.”

She looks down at him like he's a child, almost indulgently. She doesn't have the glazed-over look in her eyes that Eros would expect from her demeanor. The sheer depth of AWARENESS there is almost terrifying. Actually: she's the one who looks like a child, in that way, at least.

"Well, I'm happy to hear that."

"Mm."

"Do you—would you like me to tell you about myself?"

"Yes."

"USUALLY my name is Aphrodite. I'm the god and/or goddess of love." How much is safe to say, here? "I like people. I like getting to know them and making them happy. That's what makes me happy. I think everyone has something unique and beautiful about them. Most people can't see it in themselves, but they can see it in others. I try to help people see it."

"Mm."

"I'd like to get to know you, Tiamat."

"Mm."

"Would you like to tell me about yourself?"

"Later."

Huh.

"Is there something else you'd like to talk about?"

"Yes."

"What's that?"

"Hermes."

Tiamat's lips part almost imperceptibly—just enough for her smile to give the barest hint of teeth—and the Mona Lisa vanishes, replaced by a shark.

Sif and Thor, verse 31

What does it mean to live life together?

On the most naive level, Thor and Sif don't experience the same reality, because they're different people. They have different perspectives; they literally see things from different angles. On a more sophisticated level, though, they coexist: Thor might see one side of the apple, while Sif sees another side, and they might disagree about how ripe it is based on their differing viewpoints, but the apple can be turned around. They can, eventually, reach a consensus about what's really there.

Sif is pretty sure that the faceless man's level is more sophisticated than this. He

agrees readily that Thor and Sif can reach a consensus, but when she asks him: does their consensus agree with reality? He has only allegorical answers.

Is anything really there?

The faceless man says only, “yes”. But what does that mean? More allegory.

Implicitly, Sif had been thinking of it this way: on one side, there is an apple, an object, and on the other, Thor and Sif, the subjects observing it. But it doesn’t make sense to talk about multiple subjects. Only Sif experiences herself as a subject. Thor experiences Sif as an object, differing from the apple only in behavioral details, and the situation is symmetrical.

It’s as though there were two identical rooms. In one Thor is the subject, and in the other, Sif.

The faceless man can alter one room, arbitrarily, without changing the other at all.

Is the Thor Sif knows the real Thor? “Yes.”

What about the Thor she argued with in her vision? Over the course of many questions, Sif finds that the faceless man doesn’t seem to recognize him as being a different Thor at all, despite the fact he only exists in a false memory in Sif’s mind.

It isn’t just a false memory, though, is it? It was a possible future. The faceless man doesn’t experience possible futures as being any different from the actual future. He just picks one, and that’s the one that happens.

From a certain perspective.

The faceless man does that for every perspective, though. In all the allegory, Sif lost sight of the meaning behind it: the faceless man isn’t just powerful. He’s omnipotent. He’s further removed from Sif than Sif is from an insect. He doesn’t just influence what happens; he CHOOSES what happens. If it’s possible for Thor to be defeated at all, the faceless man could defeat him. It doesn’t matter how many or how few spells he learns in the course of aiding Sif’s quest. For all practical purposes, he already knows them all.

He’s terrifying. But: his actions are guided by love.

It’s a good thing Sigyn isn’t the one he loves, Sif thinks.

Eros and Hermes, verse 31

Eros talks to Tiamat while she steers the ship.

Hermes watches from the greatest distance physically possible, which isn’t very far. He has small binoculars.

Eros glances at him.

It's symbolic. What does distance matter, for Tiamat?

But symbols matter.

"You uh. You'd like to talk about Hermes?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"How do you love him?"

"That's...an odd question."

Tiamat waits for an answer, not breaking eye contact.

"Okay. How do I love him? I'm game. Let me count the ways. I love how driven he is. I love how he gets lost in his thoughts. I love how he cares about everything so much. I love how he can be serious and funny at the same time. I love his way with words. You can stop me any time."

"I know."

"I love his flair for the dramatic. I love how he seems to understand me better than I understand myself. I love feeling like I'm caught in some great millennia-old conspiracy that he's at the root of. Well, okay: I don't love everything about that."

It doesn't escape Eros that he has become the focus of Tiamat's previously-wandering attention.

"I could go on, but I'm curious about you too. Why do you w—why do you like—bwah. Let me put it this way, why do you care? Aren't we just wee little insects to you?"

"You aren't insects."

"Not literally, but you know what I mean. Actually, I take that back. Do you know what I mean?"

"Why do you fear me?"

Half-way through that sentence, every fiber of Eros's being independently decides to shout the same thing at him: RUN. So Eros runs, just as Tiamat is casually reaching for him.

She smiles. The ship capsizes, violently.

It's as though all of its weight shifted to one side at once.

The Hermaphrodite sinks into the ocean, and is never seen nor heard from again.

Sif and Thor, verse 32

Sif's quest is complicated.

Thor's quests are never this complicated. Thor's quests are nearly always over before supper. Sif would dearly like to believe this is just because Thor is much more effective at completing quests than Sif is, which is certainly true, but Thor's quests are rarely so abstract. He usually just has to find the right series of heroic feats to perform; he doesn't have to gain mind-bending arcane knowledge about time to move forward. Sif can overcome concrete obstacles, or get around them, if she puts enough time and effort into it; it isn't trivial for her, the way it is for her husband, but she can do it. The time she spent following Sigyn's orders proved that.

What about when the obstacles are abstract?

Some things still don't make sense.

The faceless man ISN'T omnipotent. He wasn't able to answer her, when she asked whether her memories were false. It doesn't matter that the conversation in which she asked was, itself, part of a false memory. It was a possible future; it's possible for the faceless man to run into an obstacle he can't overcome. Anything possible is trivial for him, but some things are impossible. Figuring out why is now Sif's highest priority.

The faceless man, himself, is abstract.

Maybe she can make it impossible for him to hurt her family. Or anyone. Then, she wouldn't be so terrified of asking him to do anything other than answer her questions. That much, at least, seems to be harmless. He's an ally, for now, but that could change in a heartbeat. It could even change before a heartbeat, retroactively.

Sif sits in Thor's treasure room, with legendary artifacts strewn around her, carelessly cast aside during a frantic search. She looks down into the palm of her hand, into an amber gem set in a locket, into her husband's face.

He looks faintly impressed.

"Faceless man."

"Yes?"

"Please tell me why I see my husband still in this locket."

"I can better serve your quest if I do not."

She looks up at the towering, impassive figure.

"...why is that?"

"There are many possible explanations."

Sif's eyes go very wide. "Are you saying you don't know?"

"No."

"...oh. You do know, then? You know which explanation is true?"

"Yes."

"...but you—um."

Abstract.

"What is an example of a question I could ask you directly after this one, that I would be very glad to have asked?"

"'Could asking you the wrong question make it so I never see or hear from Thor again?'"

Despite the sudden, stabbing pain in her heart, Sif manages to force out the words, mechanically:

"Could asking you the wrong question make it so I never see or hear from Thor again?"

"Yes."

Sif is very glad she asked that.

Eros and Hermes, verse 32

In the next moment, there is only blackness.

Eros screams. Then, his screaming is cut off by a hand on his mouth.

Hermes lights a match. It's still dark. Water splashes quietly, nearby.

"Let's review."

"Mph."

"Sorry."

"Where are we?"

"Deep underground, in a cavern that's never going to be discovered."

"Are you deliberately making this as much of a horror movie as you possibly can? You know she's going to show up as soon as that match goes out, right?"

"I'm trying to minimize the damage! Every time we run, Tiamat takes another bite out of reality. Now the ship's as gone as you would have been if you'd taken a second longer to move. That was really, really dangerous, by the way. I've never talked to her for that long."

Eros grabs Hermes by the shoulders and shakes him. "Nooooo! I loved that

ship! Why did you take us there if you knew that was going to happen?!”

“I panicked! It’s the first place I thought of!”

“Aww. That’s sweet.”

The match goes out.

Another is lit.

Tiamat isn’t seen. The two men resume breathing.

Eros notes: “She is a full-on sociopath.”

“No, she’s not. Her mind is too different from ours for the label to have any meaning. She’s just Tiamat. Don’t think of her in any other terms.”

“What would—gah. What does she want? And what’s with that rule?”

“I’m not thinking about anything to do with anything about what you just said. Topic change now.”

“Aaaa! This is insane! I don’t know anything and talking to Tiamat is like talking to a brick wall that WOULD LIKE TO eat me and how am I supposed to save the world under these conditions? I can’t work like this!”

Another match goes out.

Yet another is lit.

Tiamat, still, is not seen.

“You did a LOT better than I ever have. Just keep doing what you’re doing. I trust you.”

“Should I be honored or terrified that you’re telling me not to change anything?”

“You should be drilling me for info while we’re temporarily safe.”

“Drilling you sounds good. How do I get her to say a whole sentence?”

“Ask a hard enough question. Also, I’m not going to tell you not to do that, but, be prepared for the answer to ruin your day.”

“Aaaahahahah! This sucks so much!”

Yet another match goes out.

A lantern is lit, casting light on the whole cavern.

Tiamat is seen.

Sif and Thor, verse 33

Even asking the faceless man a question can have irrevocable consequences on a massive scale. Consequences beyond ordinary imagination. Abstract consequences.

Sif needs to learn how to fight an abstract foe, if she can.

The kind of foe who can make the ones you love cease to be—or never have been.

It's enough to make Sif want to give up. But Thor would never give up.

Thor can do nearly anything as one man against the world. That's his strength, and his weakness: even if he can't do it himself, he just keeps trying. Sif is sure that, even when his heart was so broken that he couldn't feed himself, he never stopped trying to think of how to make things right again. If there were a mountain in his way that he wasn't strong enough to push, he would keep pushing, forever. It's the same thing, concrete or abstract.

Sif is the opposite. She can't do anything by herself. Even small obstacles are too great for her. It's her weakness, and her strength.

"Faceless man...I need help."

"What kind of help do you need?"

"I'm not sure what kind of help I need. I'm grateful for the help you've given me, but your mind is so different from mine that we can barely understand each other. Or I can barely understand you, at least. So, I guess I need help from...someone more like me."

"What other qualities should they have?"

"Um. Intelligence. And kindness. Wait."

The faceless man waits.

He can search through every book in every library to find someone who can help her. It doesn't take him any time at all.

Massive consequences aren't necessarily negative. He may be alien, but he isn't any more malicious than the one he loves.

Sif constructs a detailed description.

Eros and Hermes, verse 33

Tiamat is everywhere.

There is no part of the cavern which is not painted with depictions of her, in designs of all sizes and styles, ranging from simple hieroglyphic figures to an

inhumanly beautiful, mind-bogglingly detailed full-body portrait that sprawls across the entire ceiling and a good part of the walls. It is immense; a cave painting that makes Michelangelo's frescoes look like cave paintings. As Eros gawps at it, slack-jawed with awe, he starts to see: it's a conglomeration of smaller portraits, no two of them alike, tessellating seamlessly into a greater whole, each one just as impossibly gorgeous as the rest, and each made of smaller portraits still, and each—

Hermes snaps his fingers in front of Eros's face.

"Buh?"

"Eyes off the pretty information hazards."

He points at Tiamat, quietly splashing her foot in a puddle, nearby.

Eros sets his jaw, and approaches. He uses his hands as blinders to keep the more Tiamatic artwork out of his field of vision. Hermes, meanwhile, gets to work examining it as closely as he can, taking copious notes.

"Hello again Tiamat!"

"Hello."

"Have you been drawing on the walls? Naughty girl. You're very good, though. I'm impressed."

"I haven't."

"...huh. I really don't get you, Tiamat. Ready to tell me about yourself yet?"

"Not yet."

"Could I ask you some questions about other things, then?"

"I'd like that."

"Super. What's the meaning of life?"

"Whose?"

Eros blinks. "Is it cheating if I say yours?"

Tiamat's smile broadens slightly, and she brushes a lock of Eros's hair behind his ear.

This is the most scared Eros has ever been.

However: he doesn't run, and he doesn't die.

"I'll take that as a yes. How about the meaning of...Hephaestus's life?"

"Toil."

He snorts. "Yeah, that's Hephaestus. How about Horus?"

"Consciousness."

"...Gaia?"

“Suffering.”

“Wow. Okay, this is probably a bad idea, but: what about me?”

“Action.”

“Thaaaat isn’t what I thought you were going to say. Okay. Action. I guess I can live with that. What about Hermes?”

“Choice.”

“Where are you getting these from?”

Tiamat smiles.

“Whoop, nevermind, bad question. Let me rephrase. Do you ever lie?”

“Always.”

Something clicks. “Well you’re just a great big mind-fucker, aren’t you?”

Then Tiamat is wearing a featureless black dress. It looks like the seam is ready to burst, if she moves the wrong way.

She just barely fits.

Sif and Thor, verse 34

The faceless man drops Sif somewhere strange, bright, and beautiful. There are people everywhere, and shining buildings. The color and variety of everything is astonishing. This place can’t possibly be part of the world Sif left.

It could be the past, or the future. She didn’t specify anything about that.

A long finger points the way.

“Go inside, introduce yourself as the golden-haired woman, and ask to meet Thoth. He is expecting you.”

Eros and Hermes, verse 34

“HERMES! LOOK! SYMBOLISM!”

Hermes looks, and starts running over. Tiamat regards her new dress, seemingly as curious about it as anyone else in the cavern.

“I may be”, she decides.

Hermes arrives moments later, breathing easily despite the sprint. He looks appalled.

“What did you do?!”

“I called her a great big mind-fucker!”

Tiamat nods. He did.

Hermes is so at a loss that he doesn’t know what to do with his hands. They move about through the air in meaningless gestures. They squish his face around.

“Did I just save the world? Did I just save the world with flippancy? I think I did. Is that what you’re trying to say? I’m good with body language.”

“I don’t know whether you saved the world or not, Eros, because I DON’T KNOW WHAT A GREAT BIG MIND-FUCKER IS.”

Tiamat smiles wide and points at herself. This. This is that.

“See? She likes it! Don’t you, Tiamat?”

“Yes.”

“Who’s a great big mind-fucker?”

“I am.”

“You are!”

Eros turns to Hermes, beaming with pride.

Hermes looks like he will vomit shortly.

“Eros. I’m going to ask you a very important question in subtext.”

Eros nods. “Cool.”

Tiamat observes the exchange.

“I’m wondering what a great big mind-fucker does.”

“Mind-fucks you in a great big way. So, the answer to your very important question is,” and Eros puts his arms around Tiamat to give her a hug.

Hermes vomits in his mouth.

Tiamat hugs back, picking Eros up bodily. He squeezes her.

“Aahahahahah! Best friends!”

Tiamat lifts Eros over her head, wearing a toothy grin. He continues giggling inanely while, subtly, she shifts her weight.

Hermes shouts, “NO!”

Sif and Thor, verse 35

Thoth sits behind a parchment-covered desk in a library significantly more impressive than anything Sif visualized for the faceless man’s allegory of time. It isn’t infinite, but neither is her imagination.

Some things can only be experienced directly.

“H-hello?”

“Hello! Come in, come in.”

Sif makes her way to the desk, and Thoth rises to shake her hand enthusiastically, looking up to her with a warm, guilelessly joyful expression. His bald, round head doesn’t even come up to her shoulders, and she’s a very petite woman. He is the tiniest, most unassuming man Sif has ever seen—excluding gnomes, anyway. It is utterly impossible to feel intimidated by him. Sif relaxes the instant his pudgy fingers close over her hand. He has a hilariously long hook nose.

“Welcome, Sif. I’m so glad to finally meet you! Can I get you anything? Why am I asking, you’ll just refuse. I’ll get you something.” He rings a little bell on the desk. “Here, sit down, sit down.”

Sif sits beside him. “Oh! Oh, thank you. Um. This is probably a silly question, but, how do you know me?”

Thoth smiles cherubically. “Magic.”

Eros and Hermes, verse 35

Tiamat swings Eros through the air. He puts out his arms in imitation of a bird or a plane, laughing helplessly.

Hermes sits down.

After a few more revolutions, Tiamat sets Eros down next to him.

Hermes states: “I don’t understand.”

Eros deadpans: “Perhaps I can elucidate you.”

“Did you find a way to CONTROL Tiamat?”

“All I had to do was give her some fashion advice, and I have her wrapped around my finger! No, I just figured her out. She’s not going to eat me as long as not eating me is a bigger mind-fuck than eating me.”

“Thaaaaaaat...”

Hermes doesn’t know what that is.

“Also, you have to hold me and kiss me and tell me everything is going to be all right, right this second, because I’ve been holding myself together with sex and bubblegum for the last twenty-four hours and the fate of the world depends on it.”

Now Hermes is the one laughing helplessly, face in his hands.

“I’m serious. Tiamat will eat us if you don’t. Right Tiamat?”

Tiamat calmly sits down next to the two men. She puts one hand behind Eros's head, and another behind Hermes's, carefully enough that she only petrifies him with terror rather than startling him into changing scenes.

Then she makes them kiss.

The thoughts of Hermes swallow their own tail, forming a perfect, meaningless circle, as Tiamat happily plays with her dolls.

Sif and Thor, verse 36

Sif enjoys fluffy biscuits and warm, spiced milk with Thoth. It makes her feel exactly as if the fate of the world doesn't depend on her.

"This is wonderful. Thank you, so much."

"My pleasure! So", says Thoth, "this quest of yours. Let's talk about it a little bit."

Sif gulps. "Okay. Will it...really only take a little bit?"

"Ahahah! Well, we'll see. As I understand it—don't hesitate to correct me, please—the trouble started when you fell in love with Vali. That wasn't anyone's fault and you shouldn't feel guilty about it. You can't decide who you love, it just happens. Okay?"

"That...makes sense to me. I can try."

"Splendid! We're off to a good start already. We make a good team, don't you think?"

Sif laughs suddenly. "But I haven't done anything!"

"You've done more than you think! Let's see, let's see. What's the next part? You fell in love with Vali, and that's fine, but then you let him manipulate you into sex, which was a betrayal of Thor's implicit trust. You should apologize to Thor for that. Loki should apologize to both of you, for that matter, but I wouldn't hold my breath there. Anyway, Thor will forgive you immediately, because he loves you."

Sif's eyes well up, but she nods firmly. She never apologized to her husband. She was too caught up with trying not to hurt him. She has a tendency to ignore the details when more important things are at stake, but sometimes the details are more important than she thinks.

Thoth starts writing a list. One: no guilt about love. Two: apologize for betraying trust.

Sif blinks. "Aren't those at odds?"

"Not in the least. After you fell in love with Vali you should have talked to Thor about it before you did anything sexual. You had a choice there and you

blew it. Big time!”

Then, she comes dangerously close to blowing milk out of her nose. “What could I have said?! Oh, I’m sorry, beloved husband, but I love Vali now.”

“Aha! I was getting to that. Your whole issue revolves around the fact that you and Thor both think you can only love one person at a time, which is so patently untrue that you’ll see it is as soon as you think about it for half a second.” Thoth writes a third item: you love more than one man.

That’s true. Sif only has to think about it for half a second: she loves Thor, and she loves Vali. However, noticing that about herself is very much like dropping a stone and watching it matter-of-factly fall into the sky. She’s known it all along, but she’s never quite taken a hard enough look at those two facts, side by side, before. She completely loses her appetite for fluffy biscuits.

“What’s wrong with me?”

“Aww.” Thoth puts a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “Nothing is wrong with you. It’ll take you a while to understand that, but you’ll get there. Trust me. Now!” He folds up the piece of parchment. “I’m afraid that’s all the time we have.”

Now Sif does blow milk out of her nose. “Aghuh! What?! I mean—I’m sorry—I don’t mean to impose—”

“You haven’t imposed! Oh, dear.” Thoth dabs at her face with a mysteriously clean handkerchief, and for an instant Sif is a miserable toddler being affectionately cared for by an indulgent uncle. “You haven’t imposed at all. If I had my druthers we would spend the whole day together and work this whole thing out step by step, but needs must. Speaking of which, I need to ask you for a favor.”

“Oh! Of course!”

Thoth picks up a small book from the desk. Its black cover has no markings, aside from a faint impression of a circle containing something like a lightning bolt shooting across a stylized eye. He puts the folded up parchment inside, and hands it to Sif.

“I need you to deliver that to someone for me, with the help of your faceless friend. His name is Apsu, by the way. The notes I wrote are for you, but the book is private; don’t read it, please. Okay?”

Sif blinks rapidly. “He has a—I certainly won’t! But, um—can I come back, after I deliver it? My quest—”

“We’ll see each other again very soon, but no, you shouldn’t come back here before your quest is over. Don’t worry though, you’ll have more help after you make your delivery. It’ll all come out okay. Now, off with you!”

They were already standing, walking back toward the door, and now Sif gets

a shocking slap on the behind that makes her clutch the book to her chest. She keeps walking with quick steps, calling out, "Goodbye! Thank you!", as she goes. That was much too familiar. You'd think she had history with that strange, mischievous little man.

As she's exiting the library, Thoth calls after her, "Good luck!"

She doesn't see him smiling the sad smile of one who has foreknowledge of the inevitable.

Eros and Hermes, verse 36

Eros is held and kissed by Hermes. At some point, the scene changes again, the two men lying together on a soft blue blanket in an idyllic forest on a warm summer day. They are, thankfully, alone.

No clothes come off, and none are going to. After dooming and then saving the world in the space of about twenty minutes, this is exactly the right amount of intensity. Some unknowable amount of time passes, with no sign of the empress of reality, as the adrenaline slowly, reluctantly departs from Eros's system.

Just because he's cool in a crisis doesn't mean he's any less terrified.

Regardless of how you get there, though: victory is sweet.

The only thing that's missing is Hermes telling him everything is going to be okay.

And so, as if telepathic, Hermes tells him:

"I don't know if anything is going to be okay."

Eros groans.

"Her other aspects never did anything like that. They would just disappear into background reality again, after I found a way to make them fit. Even if I set aside her behavior, which I'm MUCH less able to explain, I don't even know why she stayed after you...called her a great big mind-fucker."

He feels hopelessly absurd as he says it.

Eros gets into character. He's been on the other side of this conversation enough times.

"Elementary, dear pupil. Disappearing at once is what you expected. Hence, she did the opposite."

"That can't be all there is to it. That's just contrarianism. That's not a new concept, and it wouldn't come anywhere near to fitting her even if it was."

"You said, and I quote, 'Tiamat is the most unpredictable'. So she does whatever you don't predict she'll do."

It could have been predicted that Tiamat would appear at the first mention of her name.

Hermes shakes his head. “That would make her more predictable than she is. She isn’t even predictably unpredictable. She’d just be random noise, then, and she isn’t. Pi isn’t random. It has structure. She’s like that.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. She’s a great big mind-fucker. Who eats gods. If I’m honest, I’d rather never think about her again.”

A beat passes.

“You said she would have eaten us if I didn’t—do I have to tell you everything is going to be okay, or it won’t be? Is that how it works? Everything is going to be okay.”

Eros breathes a mock sigh of relief.

“Except...”

“UGGH.”

“Except it can’t be that easy. In fact, that might even be intrinsic to the concept you attached to her. It’s never that easy. Or, more accurately, I can’t think it’s that easy. Unless my thinking it’s that easy makes for a bigger mind-fuck.”

“I’m already regretting my word choice. That’s definitely going to stop being funny sooner than later. Still a little funny now, though.”

“Wait. That’s it. She’s unthinkable. She’s the mother of all information hazards. So not thinking about her actually is the best strategy. I’m going to stop now.”

Eros kisses him.

But: “No, hang on. I can’t stop her from mind-fucking me, because then she might eat me.”

Another beat.

“That...was a joke. A bad joke. I was stressed.”

“I was trying to make a joke when I said that, too. Then half-way through I started to think it might actually be true. There has to be something to her beyond ordinary things that must not be thought about. An implicit existential threat if you DON’T think about the unthinkable would be—why would it stop there? I’m sure just constantly repeating Tiamat Tiamat Tiamat in my mind would do nothing to ward her off. I have to think CREATIVELY about her. Oh. Oh, no. She’s the mother of all—if I don’t—I can’t just think about her, I have to get OTHER people—and—no, no, NO, NO, NOOOOOOOOO—”

Eros watches with slowly building horror as Hermes descends from vague concern to insane, incoherent, animal screams of panic, voice raw, eyes bugged out and flicking randomly from target to target, in desperate search of salvation. Or

of more rope.

Eros has no choice but to watch this happen. He doesn't have to watch helplessly, though.

Verse 37

A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

These can be told in any order.

A woman with golden hair walks through a forest, into a glade. In the glade there are two men on a blue blanket: one limp and unconscious, the other holding him in a headlock, tears streaming down his face.

Because Sif has instructions, she only pauses for a few seconds, rather than running away. Then she walks up to the blanket, which seems to take a very long time, Eros watching her with confused, wet eyes the whole way.

She holds out the book she had been clutching to her chest, saying, in a small voice: "This is for you."

The cover of the little black book shows the Eye of Horus behind a cracked lens.

All Eros can do is laugh, brokenly. The difference between how he thought his day would go, and how it's actually going, is just too big.

Sif waits, book held out, breath held in.

"Thanks, but my arms are full. Can you open it for me?"

When she does, two things happen: Eros sees what's written on the first page, and a tourniquet falls out, startling Sif into dropping the book as well.

The first page is simply two words: "For Aphrodite".

Sif watches as he takes the tourniquet, tightens it around Hermes's neck, and lays him down gently on the blanket.

"Is...is he going to be...okay?"

Eros wipes tears away. "Everything is going to be okay."

He could pick up the book now, and read the next page. It would make sense to do that. It may even be critically important to do that. Contextually, it's pretty obvious that book is going to tell him what he should do next. However, he has someone beautiful and vaguely frightened in front of him, and Eros is more of a people person than a book person. Besides, it seems like the first page has already made more than one suggestion.

A woman with red hair offers her hand. "Hi. My name is Aphrodite. You just

saved my butt.”

Sif uncertainly accepts the handshake from the shape-changing, man-strangling sorceress. “My name is Sif, wife of Thor.”

Aphrodite pulls her into a hug, preventing Sif from seeing the side of her mouth quirk up into a smirk. “Thank you. Seriously.”

“...y-you’re welcome?”

She draws back and holds Sif’s stiff shoulders, examining her face. “You look almost as lost as I am, Sif, wife of Thor. Would you like to trade stories?”

After a moment of consideration, Sif nods.

Behind her, a woman with no hair nods, too.

Verse 38

Aphrodite sees Tiamat behind Sif, uncomfortably close, and her brain shuts right down. She jumps as though shocked, making Sif jump too, but somehow her mouth reflexively forms the words: “Gah! Fine, you’re invited too! But you have to go first.”

Sif turns to see—black. And arms, to the left and right of the black, and, finally, after she thinks to look a few feet up, a smiling face. In a delayed reaction, her eyes decide to call the vast expanse of blackness a dress. Giants are significantly taller than Tiamat, but Sif has never seen a giant. The faceless man is the tallest humanoid creature Sif had encountered before now, and Thor the heaviest. Tiamat summarily usurps both positions at a glance, by a hair and about two hundred pounds, respectively, causing Sif to squeak involuntarily.

“Sif, this is Tiamat. Tiamat, Sif.”

While Sif is distracted, Aphrodite points a couple fingers at her eyes, then at Tiamat’s, mouthing: be good. There is probably a better way to keep Tiamat from eating people than this. Aphrodite has no intention of thinking about what that might be.

Momentarily lacking the power of speech, Sif curtsseys.

Tiamat curtsseys back.

So far, so good.

“Tiamat...is eccentric”, Aphrodite summarizes. “But she and I are involved in the same mess, and it looks like now you’re rolling around with us too, Sif, so we’re just gonna have to take her eccentricities in stride.”

“O-okay.” At least Sif has had some experience dealing with eccentricity. “Do you—um. What mess is that?”

Aphrodite puffs out air. It's a surprisingly difficult question. "Life?"

"...life is messy", Sif agrees.

"So let's talk about it. Make yourselves comfortable, ladies. I have a feeling we're going to be here for a while."

Verse 39

Three women sit in a circle in a forest glade, talking about life, on a warm summer afternoon: one small, one large, one somewhere in between. A short distance away from them, there's a man with a silver tie lying half-dead on a blanket.

Tiamat goes first.

"Life is easy."

The two smaller members of the circle wait for her to elaborate. She doesn't. One might wonder why she is invited. She is, after all, the villain. Then again, she isn't the one who put Hermes into his current state. Arguably she's responsible for it, but it would be a weak argument. She didn't summon herself, and she didn't decide to be such a great big mind-fucker, it's just how she is. Plus, it isn't her fault that Hermes has the most fuckable mind in the world.

These are the sorts of things Aphrodite tells herself so as to avoid attacking Tiamat like an enraged badger, and thereby getting eaten.

Aphrodite claps her hands together. "All right then! Illuminating as ever, Tiamat. Would you like to go next, Sif, or should I?"

Sif startles and reflexively shakes her head. "Please go ahead! I'll be last."

"Hoo. Okay." Aphrodite rolls her head around. Where to begin? "I probably would've said life is easy. Then I met the gentleman on the blanket over there, Hermes, and he convinced me life was more complicated than I thought. A LOT more complicated, actually. We were trying to sort it out, and...then he introduced me to Tiamat, and he had a mental breakdown a little later, which is why I had to choke him out. I'm afraid of letting him wake up, now. So, life is hard."

"Oh...he's your...?"

"Boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Now, it's your turn, little miss mystery girl. What brings you to the sharing circle?"

"Ah..."

Sif glances between the two larger members of the circle, unsure of what to say. They're both...odd. In their own ways. Aphrodite looks and sounds a little tired, and she was crying, before, when she was...choking out her boyfriend, while in the shape of a man. But there isn't much else about her to suggest distress, unlike Sif, who is hugging her knees just slightly too tightly. Aphrodite's posture is all calm readiness, like a cat, and Tiamat seems even less bothered. All through Aphrodite's sad story, she just smiled, giving no sign of anything other than contentment. She looks exactly like life is easy for her, in fact. Aphrodite doesn't look like her life is all that hard, either.

"Sif? You okay? We can put this off. I could just read the book, and—"

"Life is impossible!"

Aphrodite's eyebrows go up. Tiamat smiles fractionally wider.

"Or...life is VERY DIFFICULT. I married my husband twenty years ago—I remember it being twenty years ago, I don't even know if—nevermind, I married my husband twenty years ago, and our life was perfect for FOUR WHOLE YEARS before I ruined it, and then—poor Thor, he—I didn't know what to do, so I asked Sigyn for her help on my quest, but that was a mistake too, I learned spells but not many and they don't help with anything important anyway, then the faceless man came up out of the spring and I had our baby and everything was perfect AGAIN bu- buHUHuhuh—"

It occurs to Aphrodite to wonder if this is going to keep happening: everyone just noisily losing their minds in front of her, everyone except Tiamat, from now until the end of time. She doesn't move to put Sif in a sleeper hold, though. She doesn't interact with the other two members of the circle at all. She just sits very still, because the larger one is reaching out to the smaller, letting her put her head in her lap, rubbing her back while she blubbers, and saying, "ssshhh".

As if to say: it will all be over soon.

Verse 40

The situation with Tiamat is ambiguous.

If she decides to comfort someone when they have a crying fit, is it because she's feeling genuine sympathy, or is it to induce doubt in the third party present? Maybe it's just to lure prey in for the kill.

Maybe it's all three.

Aphrodite doesn't try to answer these questions. Instead, she tears off the bottom of her T-shirt, giving it to Sif to handle the prodigious amount of fluids coming out of her face.

Effortfully, Sif comes down from wracking sobs to manageable weepiness. “Thank you both.”

“Mm.”

“Any time. Take it slow. Maybe start with telling us about this Thor of yours?”

Sif looks confused for a second or so, which is enough time to make Aphrodite add, “Is he hot?”

“He’s—um. You haven’t heard of—oh.”

Thor may not have been born yet.

“He’s...”

In attempting to describe her husband, Sif discovers that all she can think of is ‘I love him I love him I love him I love him’, which is actually more a description of Sif herself.

So: “He’s very hot. Yes.”

Aphrodite nods sleuthily. “I suspected as much. Only an extreme degree of hotness could explain such a fast meltdown. So, tell us, Sif.” She leans forward on her elbows. “What gets you boiling? Is he the strong silent type? Tall dark and handsome? Gentle? Rough? Paint me a picture.”

“I—um—is—is that important?”

“Crucially important, trust me. It’s easy, just imagine Thor in your mind’s eye. What does he look like naked? Ooh, I think I see a blush. It must be something good. Whoa! A BIG blush! I have to meet this guy.”

Between the clownish performance, the involuntary images of Thor’s bare chest, and the resulting intense embarrassment, Sif loses all trace of melancholy and lifts her head before her cheek gives Tiamat’s thigh first-degree burns, going back to a sitting position. Tiamat is content to let her go. Aphrodite breathes an internal sigh of relief.

Sif makes a genuine effort to attach words to the phantasmagoria. What does Thor look like? Broad. Then: much worse blushing, because broad is accurate, and woefully inaccurate, and could be said out loud right now. A vicious cycle takes hold: everything Sif thinks to say makes her turn a brighter shade of red, and then that makes Aphrodite ratchet up her look of exaggerated interest, and that just makes everything worse. After an excruciatingly long few seconds, Sif remembers a way out.

She pulls a locket out of her blouse, and thrusts it toward Aphrodite, saying, in a slightly higher-pitched voice than normal, “Here! He’s the god of thunder and he looks like this!”

Aphrodite takes the locket, and carefully opens it.

Thor looks faintly impressed.

Aphrodite rotates the locket curiously, examining the three-dimensionality of the muscular little man trapped inside.

“Well, he’s definitely hot. This is pretty freaky though. What am I looking at here?”

“Before I had our child, Sigyn—she’s a powerful sorceress—trapped Thor in that locket. And he’s...still in there.”

Aphrodite blinks. “If I followed what you said before, which, bear in mind, is not at all guaranteed, because you were talking pretty fast, the order of events doesn’t line up here.”

“It doesn’t. The faceless man—he’s a, um...very powerful, time-traveling...faceless man. He makes everything complicated.”

“You have to be kidding me.”

Sif shakes her head. She wishes she were.

Aphrodite snaps her fingers. “THAT’S why you’re dressed like that. And that’s how you got that book!”

Sif nods. She’s dressed like this because it’s comfortable and flattering, but that isn’t what Aphrodite is talking about. Fashions have changed.

“So you spent twenty years with him, but he was also trapped in this locket most of that time, because, what. He’s going to be freed IN THE FUTURE and then go back?”

“I guess so. Um. You’re believing me...really quickly.”

“I’m charmingly gullible.”

Sif doesn’t appear to buy that, but can’t quickly formulate a way to ask why time travel doesn’t rank as a show-stopping event in Aphrodite’s life.

“Anyway, don’t worry about me. In fact, hold on a second.”

Aphrodite opens Thoth’s book, and starts reading the first page. She only gets a few sentences in before she shuts it again, placing it back in her pants pocket. The fit is suspiciously perfect.

“Yep. Called it. Book says I have to help you with your quest, so, please, continue. Who’s the fellow with no face? Where did you meet him?”

Sif doesn’t pause quite long enough for Aphrodite to ask if he, too, is hot.

“...just like that?!”

“Just like what?”

“You’ll help me?”

“Sure. Like I said, we’re in this mess together now. I don’t know how it all relates yet, but that’s what show and tell is for.”

Aphrodite hands the locket back to Sif, who, for the first time since she showed up, looks like she thinks everything might turn out okay after all.

“...thank you, Aphrodite. If you can help me put things right again, I’ll repay you any way I can. Does that mean Tiamat—”

Tiamat is leaning over to peer at the locket.

“Oh! I’m sorry. Do you want to see too?”

Aphrodite’s alarms go off, but every impulse to act is squashed by even louder alarms. She watches Sif hand Tiamat the locket containing Thor, and doesn’t do anything. She continues not doing anything as she watches Tiamat gaze admiringly at the locket, turning it over in her hands, while Sif beams, happy to finally have allies who aren’t evil, insane, or apocalyptically dangerous. She watches Sif’s expression fall and her brow furrow with bemusement while Tiamat sets the locket, chain and all, in her mouth. She still doesn’t do anything.

She hears a hideous crunch, and says: “Shit.”

The working of Tiamat’s jaw is accompanied by muffled sounds of grinding metal and amber. Her eyes close, as though she were enjoying the best chocolate ever made.

Sif’s voice is strange as she says, “What is she doing?”

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

There’s a gulp.

Verse 42

The first time Sif lost her temper—

The reaction is so fast and so violent that Aphrodite can’t stop it even though she’s expecting something like it. She didn’t expect random bursts of flame and gale-force winds. That throws her. Literally, though not far. By the time the mayhem settles down enough to see, Sif has her arm down Tiamat’s throat, up to the shoulder, and Tiamat, as usual, appears perfectly all right with everything that’s happening. Approving, in fact.

She’s just taken a whirling tornado of fiery destruction directly to the face. Not only has she barely moved, she hasn’t even lost an eyebrow. Sif fails to notice this detail. All she notices is that she can’t reach down far enough to retrieve the locket—whatever remains of it—and her rage becomes directionless, turned inward as much or more than not.

Aphrodite rushes in to forcibly pull Sif away from the edge of oblivion. There's a highly disconcerting resistance—like quicksand—but Tiamat doesn't actively do anything to influence events, this time, and Sif comes free, flailing and screaming "MAKE IT DIDN'T HAPPEN", the two of them toppling into the grass.

"Done."

A composed male voice.

Sif stops struggling in Aphrodite's grip.

"Say how."

A distant part of Sif's mind notes how much her voice sounds like Sigyn's, when all the warmth is gone.

"I freed Thor by removing him from the moment before he would have been trapped, then subjunctively took his place myself, in a convincing disguise."

"...he was never in the locket at all?"

"Never."

Sif breathes a sigh of relief.

Aphrodite remains tense.

Suppose you're a god, and someone turns you into a frog. That's allowed. Then, they feed you to a snake; that's allowed too. It's frowned upon, but it's the sort of thing gods do to each other when they get mad enough. If they get REALLY mad, they might turn you into a log, throw you in a woodchipper, and burn all the little pieces of you into ash, one by one, with an acetylene torch. Artemis pulled that one on Aphrodite, once, because Artemis does not mess around. She missed one tiny piece, though, and of course that piece grew into a tree, in stark defiance of biology, and the tree grew a peach, which was picked by a young woman passing by. At the first bite, she suddenly remembered she was Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

Death might put you out of commission for hundreds or thousands of years, but it isn't permanent. This is essentially the rule. Tiamat breaks that rule. Sif did not know that Tiamat breaks that rule, when she became a tiny embodiment of primal wrath.

How would she have reacted if she had?

As it stands, she seems mostly recovered now, if a little peeved.

"That was horrible. Let me go, please. Tiamat! That was horrible! Why would you do that?!"

"Is THIS the faceless man?", Aphrodite diverts.

"It is. Hello. Have we met?"

"No, this one mentioned you. I'm not letting you go Sif, calm down first,

you're a maniac. You, sir, are a tall glass of water."

"SHE'S a maniac!"

She's a full-on sociopath. "She's eccentric. Sometimes she eats things." Like gods. "Don't flip out, I need my arm so I can shake the hand of the faceless man."

"It wouldn't even mean anything to him, he's—HE'S eccentric."

"Yeah? Maybe we should introduce these two."

"We already know each other", the faceless man notes.

Sif and Aphrodite independently decide that these are the four most ominous words they've ever heard, for completely different reasons.

They make a visually interesting pair.

The one wearing black rises to her feet, and approaches the one wearing white. He stands stock still until she gets near, standing next to him for a beat, the two regarding each other eye to eye. From the perspective of those still lying tangled on the ground, she frames him, significantly wider at every point above the ankle and below the neck. The contrast makes his figure appear even narrower, and hers even fuller. At their hips, they strain credulity. He lifts a hand from his side, and sets it on hers. He slowly walks around her, letting a very long arm wind around a very thick waist. She remains in place, motionless, except for a smile that subtly broadens with anticipation, and eyes that track him as he reaches up to the cloth bag on his head.

"Um", Sif says.

He removes the bag at the same time his head and face—if he has one—leaves the field of vision, obstructed by Tiamat. He drops it in front of her. She's turned and drawn him into an insistent embrace by the time it lands, kissing with greedy urgency. There's no further ado.

"Um!"

Aphrodite's jaw is somewhere deep beneath the Earth and her eyebrows are somewhere in space. Caught between delight, a sense of foreboding, and bald astonishment.

"I'll take you to your next destination now."

An outstretched hand, in a white glove, with long fingers. Sif looks up and to her right to see the faceless man there. "Um!!"

Aphrodite does a double take. The same hand is also a short distance away, getting VERY friendly with the thigh Sif was resting on a little bit earlier. It disappears under blackness before her eyes, never to be seen nor heard from again.

"Your quest will be better served if we leave now, and Tiamat would like pri-

vacy.”

Tiamat gives a thumbs up, without interrupting what she’s doing.

Sif takes the faceless man’s hand.

Verse 43

Three figures appear beside Thor’s house in the evening: one standing outrageously tall, the others momentarily on the ground, getting to their feet uncertainly, coming to grips with recent events. Raucous cheers can be heard in the distance.

Aphrodite prioritizes. She turns to the faceless man.

“Bring Hermes too?”

Sif’s eyes go wide. “N—!”

The unconscious form of Hermes appears, cradled in long arms.

“Cool. Thanks.”

“Any time.”

Sif lets out a nervous breath. Hermes is set on the ground.

“Okay thank you please go away again until I call.”

At that, the faceless man nods and disappears. Sif wheels on Aphrodite.

“You shouldn’t talk to him without thinking about it very carefully first. He’s dangerous.”

That became very obvious as soon as he locked lips with Tiamat, but that isn’t the next priority. “Noted. Where are we? Also when.”

“O-oh.”

Sif takes in her surroundings.

“This is Thor’s and my home. And...”

Gears turn. Meanwhile, Aphrodite looks up at the veritable mansion they’ve been plopped next to, whistling appreciatively. “You are well off.”

The cheering is getting louder. Now Sif picks out the source of it, coming into view as it rounds a hill: a massive torch-bearing crowd.

“OH! It’s—we have to hide!”

Aphrodite lets herself be pulled by the hand as far as where Hermes is lying on the ground, then stops, startling Sif and making her lose her balance briefly. She tilts her head at the unconscious man, drawing an abashed look from Sif before she helps her carry him behind the building, leaning him against the

wall. Sif sits next to him, breathing hard, and Aphrodite sits on his other side.

She whispers: "Why do we have to hide?"

"It's the last night of my wedding with Thor, he's—his past self is carrying my past self this way. We can't let them notice us."

"Gotcha. Time travel shenanigans."

Sif leans past Hermes to give Aphrodite an odd look.

"Have—do you know how this works?"

"No, I'm just rolling with the punches until we get a break. On that note, are we safe here for a few minutes?"

"I...think so?"

"Good. I'm going to read this."

Aphrodite holds up the little black book.

Thoth and Maat

Thoth and Maat are very old gods. They were known three thousand years ago. Their love is like this:

"And what am I the muse for today?"

Maat leans over the lectern at which Thoth stands, an incredibly tall, severe-looking man whom nearly anyone would find intimidating. Small round spectacles rest on his aquiline nose. He wears an expression of intense concentration, which softens slightly as he looks up. He raises an open manuscript, showing its cover. She turns her head to the side inquiringly.

"I recognize that. Wow, it's been some time, hasn't it?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"You're finally writing it. Exciting. How far in are you?"

Thoth grimaces. "A few pages."

"Struggling?"

He adjusts his spectacles.

"It's going to come out perfectly, you know. You don't need to worry about it."

"Suppose that it only comes out perfectly because I worry about it?"

Maat leans in further, voice suddenly ominous and conspiratorial. "In that case you should worry as much as you can."

“Can you tell me which case it is?”

She shrugs unhelpfully, enjoying herself altogether too much.

“I thought not.”

“Let me refresh my memory. Perhaps I can help more prosaically.”

Maat joins Thoth in front of the lectern, and reads what he’s written so far. It opens:

This is a book about the nature of things, and of people; about differences, real and imagined; about the limits of perception; and, as all books are, about love.

“You wrote some pretentious introductory material and now you’re stuck trying to live up to your own hype, yes?”

“...that is the character of my quandary, yes.”

“Summarize your intent for me.”

“Aside from averting temporal paradox?”

“Summarize your intent without being glib.”

Thoth sighs. “I intend...to give them the tools they need.”

“Need for what?”

He gestures vaguely.

“You shouldn’t say life. Life doesn’t need any tools.”

“...tools can improve life.”

“Life doesn’t need improvement.”

“I change my answer: I intend to improve life. I intend to help.”

“How will this book prove helpful, specifically?”

“You already know that.”

Maat only gives an expectant look.

“I seem to recall someone told me I can’t put in step-by-step solutions to every specific problem they’re going to encounter.”

The look continues.

“Hence I am pretending to write for a general audience, despite the fact only one person is ever going to read this.”

“Is that a fact?”, Maat asks, casually.

Thoth opens his mouth, then closes it. After a moment: “Only one has ever read it, past tense. But...”

“The rest of your work is publically available. It would be odd if this weren’t, no?”

He cracks a lopsided smile. “It would be.”

“So, how will this book help the general audience you’re writing it for?”

“Only time will tell.”

“What are your hopes?”

“The main thing would have to be...I hope...hm. It’s a subtle thing. I’ll have to think it over. The only way I can articulate it at the moment is: I hope it gets people to Calm Down.”

“Maybe you can give me an example of someone who should calm down.”

Now he breaks into a self-effacing grin, the image of a stern professor entirely shattered. Maat nods approvingly, and Thoth continues, warming up to the subject: “I should give you two examples, actually. I’m the type who analyzes too much, but there’s also the type who analyzes too little. Whenever I meet one of either of those types, I find myself wanting to yell at them. Calm down! My type analyzes everything to the bone, not moving an inch, while the other type rushes ahead, blithely accepting the ideas presented to them without question. What they have in common is an agreement that ideas are something to get excited about. Philosophies, ideologies. Love is subject to the worst of it, of course, but it applies even to little things. Both types are apt to get upset if they share their favorite book with you—or music or joke or what have you—and you don’t like it. They’re over-attached to what they believe, or don’t. They need to calm down. Ideas are important, yes. There’s just no reason to get so worked up about it.”

“What would help them not get worked up about it?”

“Well, it would have to be something different for each type. The over-analyzers—”

Thoth stops short, shocked into silence.

Maat gives him a peck on the lips, and sashays out of the library, enjoying the sound of steady writing behind her.

Verse 44

Thor’s wedding lasted three days and three nights. He planned and executed it virtually single-handedly, not allowing his wife-to-be even to know so much as one detail. He wanted every bit of it to be a surprise for her. It was the most incredible of all his accomplishments. He traveled throughout the world to spread the invitations. Everyone would attend—everyone, everywhere. Mortal enemies stood side by side, rats and snakes putting aside their differences,

under threat of merciless smiting should the ceremony be marred by conflict. He somehow convinced the eldest forty-nine dwarves to construct a chapel of truly colossal proportions, which would, on the second night, explode, while Thor strode triumphantly away, not looking behind himself, carrying his new wife in his arms, walking all the rest of the night and day while a huge and constantly refreshing crowd of well-wishers followed, cheering, all the way to what would then be home to both of them, and across the threshold, where—

“Who’s Apsu?”

Aphrodite’s voice snaps Sif out of her reverie. She makes a confused noise.

“This thing just said ‘think like Apsu’ like everyone knows who that is. I suspect shenanigans.”

“Apsu? I don’t—wait, I do know who that is! The faceless man! Thoth said his name was Apsu.”

There’s a pause, explained by Aphrodite thinking to herself: shit. “How does he think?”

There’s a longer pause, explained by Sif mentally reviewing all the ways in which Apsu’s thinking is unusual.

“I’m...not sure how to describe how he thinks.”

“And talking to him is a bad idea.”

“...I’m not sure about that either. It’s just not something to be taken lightly. He’s...much scarier than he looks.”

Aphrodite snorts. “I believe you. You’d have to be pretty scary to feel up Tiamat and live to tell the tale.”

It occurs to Sif that she probably should have been thinking about that, rather than...her wedding.

The uproar is getting close to the house, now. They’re still safe; the crowd won’t come behind the house, since Thor will dismiss them when he reaches the door with Sif in his arms.

It occurs to Sif that there is another reason why she wouldn’t want Aphrodite to be this close to...her wedding.

It’s going to get loud in an entirely different way, soon.

“Um—we should go. I’ll help you carry Hermes.”

“The torch-wielding mob?”

“U-um.”

“...say, I recognize that shade of red!”

Sif hoists up Hermes’s legs to march away with him, trying to ignore the snickering behind her. It doesn’t work. She can feel her face continuing to heat

up. She has to change the subject, quick. Think about something else. Right: Tiamat!

"Aphrodite, who IS Tiamat? How does she know th—Apsu?"

"How do YOU know Apsu?"

"He rose up out of a hot spring near the peak of the tallest mountain in the world. I thought...at first I thought he was some kind of guardian monster, and I would have to defeat him and then everything would turn out okay somehow, but it didn't happen like that." It didn't happen like it always does for Thor. "He said he would aid me until my quest is complete, and—then I don't know what he'll do. He said he hadn't decided. He's...he doesn't act like a person, really. He doesn't think like a person. I think he'll do anything I ask him to, but sometimes he does...extra things. I don't trust him not to do something horrible because of something I say to him. I'm not sure he knows the difference between—"

Sif gasps.

"He loves HER!"

Her head spins. Puzzle pieces click into place: Tiamat is large. She puts Hermes down—they should be a safe distance away, now—and turns to face Aphrodite, hope and apprehension vying for dominance over her features.

"...well, yeah, that was pretty obvious."

"Aphrodite! Tiamat—is she a good person?"

"Uh."

"Apsu told me he judges right and wrong based on love, but he didn't say who he loved. It's Tiamat! She's the one he loves! She—and she—we have to do something about her! She's the reason he's so...the way he is. Eccentric! Aphrodite, this is important, we have to make Tiamat understand—did she even know she wasn't just eating a locket?!"

Aphrodite looks uncomfortable.

"How long have you known her?"

"About a day?"

Sif gapes.

"It was a really eventful day", Aphrodite hedges.

"We have to talk to her!"

"Thaaat's...an idea."

"We have to talk to her", Sif states, firmly, this time.

"I feel like talking to Apsu would work better."

“It wouldn’t. I’ve talked to him—maybe more than I should have. He isn’t easy to talk to, and he’s dangerous. But he’s dangerous because of Tiamat.”

“Sif, I’m gonna level with you. Talking to Tiamat is way more dangerous.”

She shakes her head. “No. You don’t know how powerful Apsu is.”

“You didn’t happen to notice how she completely no-sold your whole fiery flip-out back there, did you?”

“No-sold?”

“She ignored it.”

“Oh. My husband is the strongest man in the world, and my daughter may be the strongest woman. Strength doesn’t scare me. Apsu is powerful in a completely different way. He controls time, Aphrodite. It took me a long time to understand, but that means he can just...make you never have existed.”

Aphrodite narrows her eyes. “How?”

“Um. It’s complicated.”

“I’m pretty sure we have plenty of time.”

The air is pierced by a high-pitched squeal, which makes Aphrodite jump. She doesn’t realize what it is until she sees the horrified expression on Sif’s red, red face. They were not a safe distance away yet.

Verse 45

“Whoa. Sounds like past you is having FUN.”

There’s a long, howling moan, coming from the direction they came.

“Also, you have really good lungs.”

Sif buries her face in her hands.

“Aw. You poor thing. You know I’m just messing with you, right? Seriously, you don’t have anything to be embarrassed about. Especially if your love life is still anything like...”

Aphrodite waits a second. Almost on cue, there’s another clearly-uncontrollable scream of rapture in the distance.

“That!”

The Sif that is twenty years older moans for an entirely different reason.

Aphrodite holds up a hand. “Sif, you give me a high five right now. We are celebrating this.”

She looks up, confused. “What?”

“High five.”

She uncertainly mirrors the gesture. Aphrodite slaps her hand into Sif’s, making the absence of a clapping sound. Sif provides so little resistance, it’s like giving a high five to a stuffed animal.

“They don’t do high fives where—er, they don’t do high fives in your time?”

“I-I guess not?”

“Huh. I’d better keep that in mind.”

They carry Hermes further away, to what really, really must be a safe distance.

After they stop, Aphrodite notes the sad, vulnerable expression on her companion. Sif hugs herself, as though cold. Her shoulders are drawn in, making her look even smaller than she is.

“Hey...are you okay?”

She nods minutely, without making eye contact, which Aphrodite interprets as a reflex more than an answer. It takes a little while before she gives a genuine response.

“...everything is happening so fast.”

Aphrodite doesn’t comment. Instead, she just waits for Sif to finish thinking about whatever she’s thinking about. When she looks up, Aphrodite gives her a tender smile, and takes her hand.

“We have plenty of time. Let’s just take it easy for a while.”

So they take it easy for a while.

They spend the night lying in the grass next to Hermes, talking about nothing of consequence. Telling stories, getting to know each other. It seems like every story Sif has to tell is about Thor, or Thrud, her daughter, and that tends to lead right back to the present predicament, so Aphrodite does most of the talking. No heavy stuff. She picks light-hearted flings from her past at random—well, mostly random. She’s trying to avoid culture clash, so she talks about boys, not girls. Ares, Poseidon. Sif giggles at Aphrodite’s impersonation of an extremely drunk Dionysus. Adonis, Hephaestus.

Well, things were pretty serious with Hephaestus, but he was also a big goof. Aphrodite shares the story about him trying to build, quote, The Vibrator of Olympus, so that she would stop pestering him for sex, because nearly every part of that is hilarious. He put a stupendous amount of effort into refining the design, utterly undermining his original purpose. He spent all his time working on a silly machine to let him spend all his time working on silly machines, and he thought he wasn’t getting what he wanted, because Aphrodite never lost interest in him. That thing was amazing, but the trick was to get its designer to operate it. She had to be pretty devious to get that to happen, feign-

ing ignorance about how to use it, until that didn't work anymore because the latest version was "so intuitive, even you can figure it out". Then it was on to the next wily scheme, just a constant arms race of technological innovation against shameless manipulation. There was no way Hephaestus could win. He was doomed from the start: Aphrodite has exactly zero interest in masturbation, which he could never get through his thick skull, no matter how technically she explained it. He couldn't imagine that what she wanted was HIM. He was an engineer all the way; he couldn't conceive of himself as consisting of anything more than mechanical functions. Trying to obsolete himself made perfect sense in his twisted view of things. Aphrodite wants love, contact, the experience of feeling being felt. No number of orgasms per minute is tempting, if there's nobody around to exult in it with.

The story requires a brief explanation of what, exactly, a vibrator is, but after that Sif is in scandalized giggling fits all the way through. Aphrodite just neglects to mention she was married to the big lunk at the time, and this whole fiasco directly preceded an entirely humorless divorce.

"In the end he threw all the prototypes in a volcano, that monster. Worst day of my life. I'd give an arm and a leg to get my hands on one again." She reaches up toward the stars, as though the fabled Vibrator of Olympus were just barely outside her grasp.

Then she moves on to the next guy, and the next, and the one after, until drowsiness takes hold. Aphrodite drifts off to sleep, half-hearing Sif whisper, with a note of wonder, "so many boyfriends".

Verse 46

"Good morning sunshine."

"Nn. Aphrodite? Good morning."

Sif rubs sleep out of her eyes. Aphrodite slowly blurs into focus. She's reading the book. At some point Aphrodite stops blurring into greater focus, and Sif is forced to admit that there actually are dozens of small birds and rodents sitting all over her, many of them apparently reading the book with her. Sif gestures vaguely at them, saying, "um".

"I made friends."

"Um?"

Aphrodite shuts the book and waves it around demonstratively. "Magic."

"It's...a spellbook?"

"It's more of a rambling treatise on how not to go crazy in a crazy world, but it also teaches you a couple magic tricks. Supposedly the one that's harder for

you to learn is the one that's more useful for you, but I got this right on my first try and if you ask me, I am getting a LOT of use out of it. This is Zeus." She indicates a tiny sparrow on her shoulder. "Look how cute he is."

"...can I pet him?"

Aphrodite and Zeus look at each other. She nods toward Sif. Zeus flicks his head toward Sif then Aphrodite then Sif then Aphrodite, then flies onto Sif's shoulder, startling a squeak out of her. She gently pets his head with a finger. He seems to like it, eyes closing happily.

"He's very cute", Sif coos.

"I know, right?"

"...wasn't Zeus one of your boyfriends?"

"Lil Zeus has nothing in common with Big Zeus, except that he's a major horn-dog. So they have everything in common."

The rest of Sif's mind arduously wakes up, piecemeal, while the part dedicated to pouring affection on cute things focuses on Zeus. The part responsible for monitoring the status of Thor and Thrud misfires, due to temporal ambiguity—Thor is okay right now, in the past, and Thrud is nonexistent(!)—waking up the part that keeps track of Apsu-related complications. That part reminds her that Tiamat is important, somehow, and that, in turn, wakes up the social reasoning part, at which point Sif remembers why Tiamat is important and also that Aphrodite is a person. Hermes, too. Currently serving as a warm cushion for numerous small animals, and as lower back support for Aphrodite. She's holding the book with one hand, reading again; her other hand's fingers are interlaced with his.

Maybe it was the decision to take it easy, or maybe Sif just hasn't been awake long enough to become so overwhelmed with the scope of her quest that she can't spare a thought for anything else. Whatever the reason, now is the time when it occurs to Sif to feel guilty.

"How do you feel, Aphrodite?"

Aphrodite shuts the book again. She gets a hint of a wry smile. Her eyes look tired. Animals start hopping off of her and Hermes, returning to their lives in no particular hurry. Mice, sparrows. A rabbit.

How does she feel?

"Dirty, hungry and sad. You?"

"...the same. Um." Can't invite her to breakfast or a bath. Past Thor and Past Sif are going to be inside—mostly in bed—for the rest of the month, according to Sif's rosy recollection. Not much to do about being dirty or hungry without asking Apsu to help, and invoking that kind of power for something so

frivolous doesn't seem like a good idea. Although that's probably safer than asking him to do something important.

Aphrodite raises an eyebrow at the extended silence, snapping Sif back to the present.

"Could you tell me again what's wrong with Hermes? Unless you don't want to. It's just...maybe it would be easier to heal him, than—my marriage."

At this point the incipient wry smile comes fully to the surface. "We're going to solve my boy problems before your boy problems?"

"I-if you want to. And you think it's a good idea."

"I think it's a great idea, but I'm biased. Okay." She exhales, thinking. Looks at Hermes's closed eyes; puts a hand on his chest for a moment, in absent-minded affection. "So, basically, I think what happened is that he glimpsed some horrible cosmic truth that no one is supposed to know about, and now the more he thinks about it the worse it gets. I glimpsed the same thing he did, but that isn't as big a deal for me. I'm just not thinking about it. The thing about Hermes is that he can't not think. I really have no idea how to keep him from thinking about it, other than depriving his brain of oxygen, like so." She taps the tourniquet, still tied around his throat.

After all of Thor's stories, the idea of a secret too terrible to be known is familiar ground for Sif. So, she doesn't ask what it is. Instead, she asks: "What if he forgot about it?"

Aphrodite blinks. "That...you know, that'd probably work."

Sif nods, furrowing her brow. What did Thor do about that one sorcerer who was driving everyone mad with forbidden knowledge? "There's a river in the underworld...if Hermes drinks from it, he'll lose his memory."

Aphrodite slaps her forehead. "Shit! I know about that! What was—Lethe! That's its name, right?"

"I'm not sure if it has a name...maybe? Do you know how to get there?"

She opens her mouth, about to say she doesn't, then closes it. "Yeah, I think I can get us a ride. Doesn't Lethe obliterate ALL of your memories, though? That wouldn't be ideal."

"You forget more the more you drink, so if you only take a few drops...it's a little dangerous. He won't forget everything, but if he drinks too much—he—might not remember you. But you knocked him out right after he learned whatever it was that drove him mad, didn't you?"

Aphrodite wobbles a hand in front of her. "More or less? It was kind of a gradual realization."

"Would it be really bad if he forgot the last few months? I think that's the most

he would forget even if there's an accident. Unless he falls in, but we can hold on to him. And, um—there's Apsu. If anything goes wrong. But I don't want to call him if it isn't absolutely necessary.”

“...I think it's worth it. Best case scenario is he only forgets a couple hours. There were some good times before that, but if he forgets those I can help him recreate the memories.”

“Oh! I forgot you were a sorceress.”

Zeus flies out of Sif's lap, and back to Aphrodite's shoulder. The other animals, meanwhile, have left.

“A what now?”

“Um. A spellcaster.”

Aphrodite tilts her head to the side. Zeus imitates her.

“A...magic user?”

She hooks a thumb toward the unconscious man behind her. “This is the guy who does magic. As of this morning I can talk to animals, but that's the only trick I know. The other one in this book makes zero sense to me.”

“Then...how...”

Sif gestures vaguely around her own body, especially the chest area.

Aphrodite narrows her eyes for a moment. She is momentarily distracted by the one way in which Sif is large. Then, it clicks. “How did I change form?”

“Yes!”

“Ah! Natural talent.”

“Oh.”

Zeus flies away.

Sparrows dislike puns.

Verse 47

It is decided that Sif and Aphrodite will take Hermes to the underworld, where he will drink from the river Lethe and forget the nature of Tiamat. It will surely be an epic journey, fraught with peril and misadventure; trivial for one such as Thor or Thrud, but for Aphrodite or Sif, it may take months or years to find the way and overcome whatever challenges lie in wait for them. Nothing about it sounds easy.

Occasionally, the only obstacle is your own perception.

Aphrodite removes the tourniquet and slaps Hermes across the cheek. “Oi!”

she tells him.

He gasps and wakes, as startled as Sif.

Aphrodite plants a kiss on his lips before he can say anything. He mustn't be allowed to get his bearings! Gotta keep him off balance! That's the reason for this, if anyone asks!

She breaks away. He blinks rapidly. "Hermes! Quick, take you me and her to the underworld, near Lethe if you know it, and tell me the last six digits of pi!"

"Pi doesn't have one last digit, let alone six", Hermes complains, reflexively, as the three arrive at the river Lethe under the perpetual twilight of the underworld.

Aphrodite dips two fingers into the water while she says, "So tell me them in reverse order". When he tries to respond, Hermes finds himself sputtering instead, a few drops of forgetfulness flicked into his open mouth.

Sif stands by, eyes wide, one hand covering her own open mouth—in astonishment, not as a defensive measure, although that might be a reasonable reaction, too.

Hermes sways on his feet, craning his neck around crazily to take in his unexpected surroundings, recovering from the massive cognitive double-whammy of the waters of Lethe and enough oxygen deprivation to outright slay anyone short of a god. This takes him a good four, five seconds. Sif watches the scene unfold helplessly, unable to react in the scanty intervals between one surprising thing and the next.

Aphrodite just stares at Hermes with a weird intensity, anticipating either the best or the worst, and nothing in between. As soon as it looks like he's come to his senses, she asks him: "What's the last thing you remember?"

Which, on top of his current location and swimmy mental state, is more than enough information for someone like Hermes to piece together the rest. More or less.

"The Hermaphrodite sinking. We were running from—" he manages, before an amorous redhead leaps on him and destroys his power of speech.

"Oh!! No! Aphrodite, stop! Don't kiss him!"

The warning comes much too late. To their credit, the reunited lovers stop what they're doing, freezing in position. Their faces remain messily crushed together. Aphrodite, in particular, is caught mid-grope, one hand clutching a firm Hermetic buttock. She gives a sidelong peer to Sif with wide, guilty eyes. After an awkward moment of silence, she gets one more squeeze in.

"Stop!!"

Aphrodite's words come out a bit slurred, with her lips still pressed against Hermes's: "How come?"

Hermes pushes away incrementally—Aphrodite makes herself let him—and he points out, “Because I just drank from the river Lethe and now you’ve probably forgotten something, too.”

Sif nods vigorously.

“Oh.”

Aphrodite contemplates that.

She pulls incrementally closer, pursing her lips in Hermes’s direction with her eyes still on Sif.

“No! Aphrodite, what’s wrong with you?! Wait at least half an hour!”

Aphrodite pouts.

Sif puts her foot down. “Half an hour!”

Hermes extricates himself and takes a moment to straighten his tie, regaining some semblance of composure. He takes a step toward Sif, extending a hand in greeting. “Hermes Trismegistus, magician. Nice to meet you, miss...?”

“S-Sif. Um.” She takes the offered hand, uneasily. Then, his formality gives her some ground to stand on, and she noticeably relaxes. “Sif, wife of Thor. It’s nice to finally meet you too, Mister Trismegistus.”

He gives her a lopsided smile. “Just Hermes is fine.”

“Hermes. Um. Should we see if Aphrodite...?”

“Yes, good idea. Aphrodite, what’s the last thing YOU remember?”

“Epic, knee-liquifying smooching.”

“Before that?”

She rolls her eyes and counts off on her fingers: “I flicked some water droplets into your mouth, then before that I got you to take us to the underworld, then before THAT Sif and I had a sleepover...”

Hermes looks to Sif for confirmation. She takes a moment to figure out what’s being asked of her. Then: “It seems like she remembers everything?”

Aphrodite lights up with hope. “Does that mean—”

“No”, Sif and Hermes tell her, simultaneously.

She crosses her arms petulantly, resuming her pout.

Hermes turns back to address the unfamiliar face. “So, Sif. I take it we actually haven’t met before, and I’m not just forgetting that I know you, but it looks like you and Aphrodite are quite friendly already, so, knowing her, you must have met at LEAST an hour ago. If you had a sleepover, at least a night. Am I close?”

Sif nods. “We met a night and a day ago. You were there too, but—you were unconscious.”

“Ah?”

“I choked you out cold”, Aphrodite volunteers.

“Ah. You had a perfectly good reason, I’m sure.”

“Hey! I know what you’re thinking. I am not the goddess of kink, sir. I strangled you for completely non-erotic reasons this time. It was a medical necessity. You were out of your gourd.”

“Hence Lethe.”

“Exactly. Sif’s idea.”

“You learned a secret that drove you mad”, Sif explains, in a small voice.

Hermes nods in understanding. “Say no more. Good thinking, Sif.”

Sif brightens. He’s a peculiar man—maybe everyone is peculiar, in the time Hermes and Aphrodite are from—but it’s a relief that he doesn’t seem upset about the loss of his memories.

“On that note”, Hermes continues, turning to Aphrodite, “are we still running from something?”

Aphrodite grins with pride. “Nope! We’re helping Sif.”

Some hitherto-unnoticeable tension drains out of Hermes. “What are we helping Sif with?”

“I’m thinking breakfast and a warm bath, for starters.”

Verse 48

Hermes’s scene changes are nothing at all like Apsu’s time travel. For example, the latter is a jarring experience: one moment you’re here and now, and the next you’re there and then. With the former, by contrast, it’s difficult to identify a specific moment where the shift took place. Sif isn’t sure, in retrospect, exactly when she left the underworld, or when she found herself in Hermes’s hilltop abode, or whether there was any time in between. Certainly she was here by the time it occurred to her to ask Hermes where ‘here’ was. Oddly, he asked her to guess, and her guess was correct: the little house overlooks a little town in a little green valley, which Sif is familiar with. She’s not too far from home. The view is beautiful.

While she’s having a bath—warm, as promised, the water somehow already heated to the perfect temperature over a bed of coals by the time she gets to it, despite no servants in sight, and probably no room in a house this modest—it occurs to her that Hermes couldn’t possibly own a house here. Could he?

Maybe if he's from the past, not the future, but—then he wouldn't know about the house to begin with. Only his future self would, and no future Hermes is apparent. How to explain this? Later she asks, nervously, if Hermes actually owns this house, but he chuckles and answers in the affirmative. So how can this place exist? And how—and when—did they get here?

“Magic.”

Sif takes another bite of inexplicable bacon. Who cooked the bacon? Where did the bacon come from? Hermes doesn't have pigs. Is this even real bacon? It's delicious—as Sif has enthused already, probably too many times—she's so grateful simply for the fact these two are willing to help—they're such a cute couple, Aphrodite snuggled up sleepily against Hermes while he talks to Sif with a bright, interested expression—they both finished their breakfasts already, Sif is only half done, it's all so good, the bacon especially—but IS it bacon? Sif has nothing to compare against. She's never actually had bacon, before. It's a nearly-exotic delicacy. It must not be real; Hermes had to have conjured it. But conjured food isn't filling, because it's not made of anything—something you learn when you invite Sigyn to dinner—and this is. And this house—

“Magic doesn't work like that. Does it?”

Hermes tilts his head speculatively. “You're really thinking about this, aren't you? Have you studied magic yourself?”

Sif feels herself blush slightly. “I'm a sorceress. Not a very good one. I mean, not an evil sorceress, just—I don't know many spells. And they aren't very powerful. And I'm not very powerful. I'm rambling, I'm sorry.”

“We forgive you”, Hermes and Aphrodite both say, Aphrodite murmuring it half-consciously. Sif blushes more. She's apologizing so much that forgiving her is becoming a reflex for them.

“Could I see a demonstration?”

Well, that much Sif can do. She holds up her palm, a candleflame appearing in it.

Hermes's eyes get very wide. He starts to lean forward until Aphrodite whimpers and pulls him back. “That—okay, well, that would explain your confusion, wouldn't it? What you call magic and what I call magic aren't the same thing. I have no idea how you're doing that. How are you doing that?”

“O-oh.” Sif snuffs the flame. “Um. I...don't know. I haven't thought about that for a long time. I just do it. No, I can give you a better answer than that. I...will it.”

“You will it? It takes willpower?”

Sif considers. “I think so. I don't have a very strong will. My daughter, Thrud...Thrud

knows most of the same spells I do, and they're much more powerful for her than they are for me."

"Spells are discrete? If I ask you how many spells you know...?"

"I know six. Thrud knows five."

"What are they?"

"One to control earth, one to control fire, one to control wind, one to control water, one to see elementals, and one that...is more complicated, but it makes another's word binding."

Hermes has an awfully intense look in his eye. "Can you teach me?"

"U-um. I can, yes. You really want to learn?"

"I desperately want to learn. It's kind of my thing."

"Then, I'd love to teach you, Hermes. It's the very least I can do to repay you! Only, we'd have to go outside, and..."

Sif gestures vaguely at Aphrodite, who scrunches her eyes more firmly shut, makes a needy noise, and squeezes Hermes a little harder.

"Maybe later", Hermes decides.

Sif nods. "Later. I promise."

"In the meantime, I can tell you about my kind of magic, if you're curious."

"I'm very curious. But, you don't have to, if it would bore you."

"Please. The only thing better than a talented teacher is an eager student."

Sif finds herself blushing again.

Verse 49

Hermes theorizes that sorcery—the magic Sif knows—has to do with intention. Hermetic magic has to do with perception. So, it's illusions. But it's also real. Real illusions. And it doesn't have spells. It's just one 'spell', sort of, applied in different ways. Sif doesn't feel like she understands Hermes's kind of magic any better than she did before he explained it.

Hermes, on the other hand, seems to understand Sif's kind of magic alarmingly well.

Aphrodite saunters outside with wet hair. Sif is there, arms held up as though to protect herself, flinching intermittently, watching the source of pyrotechnics nearby. A cackling man standing in mid-air, surrounded by wildly twisting pillars of earth, streams of water orbiting around him in a massive sphere of craziness while he shoots flame into the sky in gigantic goutts that curve and

warp in contempt of physics. A swarm of elementals dances around in it all, chanting, “thrice-great Hermes, master of all magic, thrice-great Hermes”, and so on, though this part Aphrodite neither sees nor hears.

She stands next to Sif, her hands on her hips, admiring the view.

“I think maybe I shouldn’t have taught him spells!”, Sif half-shouts, to be heard over the whipping winds. Aphrodite’s hair is dry in moments.

Aphrodite pats her on the back encouragingly. Silly Sif. You did good. Look how much fun he’s having. Come on, let’s guide you back inside, clearly Hermes is okay by himself for a while. Atta girl.

“Was I really in the tub that long?”, Aphrodite asks, once they’re out of the inclement weather.

“We only started twenty minutes ago”, Sif protests, disbelieving in the face of how quickly the situation spiralled out of control. “We were just talking before that.”

Aphrodite whistles appreciatively. “Fast learner. But, I knew that already. The man is multitalented.”

Sif fidgets and grimaces.

“In bed”, Aphrodite adds.

“You aren’t worried about him? You said he went mad before, and...”

The hill rumbles under their feet. Hermes is presently riding an enormous column of earth shaped into a centipede. Also, making it breathe fire.

Aphrodite waves a hand dismissively. “Nah, he’s fine. That was different. How about you? How are you holding up?”

Sif shifts around uncomfortably, sighs. “I’m okay. Much better. Thank you, for breakfast, and...for everything.”

Aphrodite carefully examines the small woman before her. Everything about her body language is screaming ‘not okay’. She looks on the verge of tears, in fact, hugging herself tightly to keep from shattering into a million pieces. Hermes isn’t being **THAT** much of a maniac. In fact, Sif is barely reacting to the booms of havoc outside. Something else is bothering her.

The funny thing is, Sif’s clearly not a fragile person, as much as she thinks she is. She’s resilient. Determined, too, when it comes to her family; it’s plain to see in her eyes, and to hear in her voice, when she talks about her quest. She might be more determined than Hermes, when it comes down to it, which is saying something. She’s vulnerable, though. She might be the most vulnerable person Aphrodite has ever met. You can’t not want to protect her. On the other hand, just keeping her away from anything that might hurt her—even her own thoughts—isn’t going to help anyone.

By the time Aphrodite decides that, yes, here a hug is a good compromise between letting the issue drop and pressing her about it, she's already been hugging Sif for a good ten seconds.

At first Sif stiffens at the unexpected embrace, then goes limp, and feels liquid flowing across her cheeks in great volume. It takes her a couple seconds to realize that she's crying, silently. She's not sure why she's crying. She remains confused right up until after she's heard herself say, in an oddly calm voice, "he's so much like Vali".

"Who's Vali?"

"My lover."

There's a pause.

"Your illicit lover who's at the center of all your problems, but who you can't blame for anything because you love him with all your heart?"

Another pause.

Aphrodite feels Sif nod, weakly. She'd probably fall to the floor if she let her go.

"Yeah, thought so. You should tell Hermes that, it's a big compliment."

"I haven't seen him for more than fifteen years."

"Dude, you saw Hermes like two minutes ago."

"Vali. I haven't seen Vali."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to a whole lot and not want to a whole lot?"

"Yes."

"Does he want to see you?"

"I don't know. He disappeared. He can't be found."

"How come?"

"Thor tried to find him, and couldn't."

"How come he disappeared?"

"I don't know."

Aphrodite moves to hold Sif just far enough away so she can look into her eyes. She looks...distant. Heartbroken. Her face is tracked with tears.

It takes a major expenditure of willpower to not kiss her right then, and Aphrodite only manages it at all because the best case scenario is that Sif pushes her away and tells her she has cooties. The worst case scenario is too horrible to consider.

Instead: “You’re a big steaming mess. I’m going to carry you to your room so you can have a nap or cry or whatever you need to do to feel human again, and I am going to say absolutely nothing about this whatsoever, to anyone, especially not to Hermes, until you do. This, right here, is not a big deal, at all. I have literally broken down harder than this in the last week. If you hide longer than you need to because you’re embarrassed I will never let you live it down. I will make fun of you for all eternity. Other than that you can be alone for as much or as little time as you want. Either way, you have my everlasting respect and admiration as a fellow feeler of deep feelings. Cool?”

Sif nods.

Aphrodite carries her to her room.

Verse 50

Sif’s room in the house on the hill is suspiciously well suited to Sif in particular. It is suspiciously difficult to think of it as a guest room. It is, suspiciously, intrinsically Sif’s.

It’s not home—

But it’s comfortable. It’s cozy. It’s very much like the room Sif had in Odin’s house, in fact, except now she doesn’t have a roommate.

She lies in bed for a while, staring at the ceiling.

Between the time she gave birth to Thrud and the time she pronounced, in a breathtaking demonstration of foolishness, that love outweighs marriage...she barely thought about Vali, as Vali, at all. Maybe she never did. After he disappeared, at some point she stopped thinking, “I’ve been unfaithful to my husband with Vali”, and started thinking, “I’ve been unfaithful to my husband”, only. The fact someone else was involved is almost too much to think about, because, after everything, she does love Vali, still. She misses him, and then she’s disgusted with herself for missing him. Nauseated, torn in too many directions. She curls into a ball.

This is a big deal. This is a very big deal. Aphrodite is wrong, this is a big deal, and Sif is a monster. Thoth is wrong, too. There is something profoundly wrong with her. For one thing, she’s in agony. She is quite possibly cursed. Maybe Sigyn cursed her. She’d never met Sigyn before inviting her to dinner—which was a bad idea—so she can’t think of any reason why Sigyn would have cursed her before that, or even how, but Sigyn is insane. No, wait.

Sif uncurls.

Maybe Sigyn cursed Thor. The first time he stopped her from destroying the world was before Sif met Vali. The timing makes sense. She could have cursed him to have an unfaithful wife. Sif isn’t cursed. She is a curse, herself. If the

curse on Thor is broken—

She winces. She can't want to stop loving Vali. It's inconceivable. Even if it's not true love, even if it's accursed, it's still love.

She pulls a piece of parchment from her pocket. An itemized list with three entries, written in neat cursive. The third item: you love more than one man.

It's hard to say whether that's helpful information. It's certainly insightful. Thoth saw clearly, right into Sif's heart, where she'd only ever seen a muddle. But: all he said is that she loves more than one man. Only the fact, not the reason behind it. Why does she love more than one man? More importantly, what is she supposed to do about it?

Sif has a vision of ripping herself in two bloody halves, and giving one half to Thor, the other to Vali.

No one wants a half-wife. Thrud doesn't deserve a half-mother. Sif doesn't want to be a half-woman. Is that what she is? Is that what she's been?

She shudders, guilt and shame and revulsion and all slick black slimy things crawling through her at once, continuously, with no sign they will ever leave. She is full of vileness and she is vile.

You can't love more than one man. You can't. No one can. How can she? How can anyone? How can Aphrodite?

A delirious thought.

Aphrodite has had so many boyfriends. Which is stranger: that she loved none of them, or that she loved them all?

Sif laughs.

She cry-laughes. She laugh-cries. It's a vaguely horrible kind of experience; it makes her think she's going to vomit up bacon. It makes her fear for her nice clean sheets. Hermes's nice clean sheets. Sif's room is in his house. He's so much like Vali.

Aphrodite loves him. It's obvious she loves him. No one could mistake it. The way she looks at him, the way her cheeks flush when he says something nice to her...

It's love. She hasn't married him. He's her boyfriend, only. How long has that been the case? She must know she's in love. She sees things so clearly, Sif thinks. And Hermes must know. Does he not love her, too? That would be terrible. But she would know that, too, and wouldn't that destroy her? Yet there she is, standing so very tall, as though the height difference between Sif and Aphrodite were as great as it is between Aphrodite and Tiamat. It isn't; it only feels like it is. Aphrodite carries herself with the same confidence Thor does. She said she'd broken down worse than this last WEEK?

Well.

Thor is broken too.

But Aphrodite isn't broken now, if she ever was before.

So many boyfriends.

Aphrodite could never give a piece of herself to each one. The pieces would have to be smaller than grains of sand for there to be enough. That would destroy anyone, even her, no matter how much stronger she is than Sif, yet there she is. And how could she have made it to Hermes, if she loved none of them? Wouldn't that destroy her just as surely, passed from one man to another, seemingly without end, each one carving out his piece? Without love, lust can only ruin.

If Sif is cursed, Aphrodite must be cursed seven times over.

No. There has to be some other explanation. No one could be terrible enough to make love into a curse. If there is any limit to evil, that is well beyond it.

Loki and Sigyn

Loki and Sigyn are young gods. They were known a thousand years ago. Their love is like this:

Loki is a busy man. He has a lot of irons in the fire.

It is an imperfect metaphor.

Irons do not generally explode and maim you when you put them in fire. Loki's schemes are frequently unsuccessful. This time, though, he made an especially egregious miscalculation, in that he underestimated the precision of Odin's seers. Hence Odin has now bound him in chains at the bottom of a hot spring that sits on the highest mountain in the world. The hot spring is very hot.

He drowns and burns.

A duration passes. The boiling point of iron is well above that of water, though not this water. Loki cannot tell time, because his eyes are too cooked to differentiate between day and night, and, also, he is in searing agony and perpetually drowning, which is distracting. He can not even scheme; his thoughts turn to cinders and dissolve before they can form. It will probably be difficult to get out of this situation without being able to scheme.

Probably, not certainly: a sorceress fishes him out of the spring, snaps his chains with a snap of her fingers, and heals his wounds instantly with a balm that she dumps on his head.

Then she laughs at him.

"What is—"

She holds up a finger, her face placid.

Then she laughs more, great heaving cackles that double her over.

Loki waits, arms crossed, a sneer on his lips.

She collects herself finally, and says: “Continue.”

“What is the meaning of this? Why have you freed me, sorceress? Know that I have not asked your aid and I am not bound to you in gratitude.”

“No gratitude is asked. I have freed you, fool, because you amuse me. I wish to see you fail. Go fail, now.”

She makes a shooing gesture.

Loki bristles. “My purpose is not your amusement, you vile creature.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I will not do as you ask.”

“We shall see.”

“I am no fool. I will adapt my next scheme to the information which I have gathered in this—information-gathering ploy.”

“I tire of your mewling. I will propel you now.”

“Propel?”

Sigyn propels Loki off of the mountain by summoning a carrion bird to drag him through the air by the nose.

Loki writes this experience off as a minor setback. He hatches and executes a series of schemes, which fail. Sigyn cackles at her divining pool. She is—admittedly—nudging things, a little. But mostly he’s just really bad at this.

He gets himself eternally imprisoned again.

Sigyn frees him, so that she can laugh in his face, and so that she can watch him continue to fail.

This cycle repeats many, many times.

One time, Loki says to her: “I do not need you to free me, you know! Powerful you may be, but I have my own tricks. You hold no bond over me.”

Sigyn scoffs. “I could bind you at will, you wretched thing.”

“Is that so? Perhaps your powers extend only so far as enabling me to continue my work, like a homely wife who is useful for nothing except overcooked stew, which, I’m sure, is what you would be, were you even sufficiently desirable to procure the worst man in the world.”

“Ahahahahahah! Do you never lose your bluster? How much of an idiot are you?”

“I’ll lose my bluster when I’m proven wrong.”

“I’ll prove you wrong on all counts, then. My powers extend into every realm, and grow every day.”

She plunges a hand into his ribcage, inducing a grunt and a whimper. Her fingernails are long, and very sharp. She draws out his heart. A lesser sorceress would then put this heart in a box and seal it in a castle, where someone would inevitably steal it. Lesser sorceresses are, frankly, dumb. Why make your spells breakable? Sigyn swallows the heart whole, in fits, punching her chest to force it down. It’s no fun at all, and, worse, doesn’t even look dignified, but that’s the price of power. Not even Sigyn herself can undo this, now. The nausea won’t fade soon, but it’s easy enough to ignore.

“Now you love me”, she rasps, then clears her throat delicately. When she continues, the smooth, imperious veneer has returned to her voice. “Ask me to marry you.”

Loki chokes and gurgles with his sucking chest wound until he can manage a strangled, “marry me”.

“I accept.” She conjures wedding bands on their fingers. “By the power vested in me as the greatest sorceress in the world, I now pronounce us husband and wife.” She grabs him by the collar and kisses him full on the lips. His lips are bloody, which doesn’t matter one bit. Hers are as well. It’s even the same blood. He collapses to the ground as she releases her grip.

“Consider yourself bound. Idiot.”

Loki mutters something, struggling with a ruined lung.

Sigyn leans over him and cups a hand to her ear. “What was that, oh great schemer?”

“Perh—glk!...perhaps...hgh...you are the one...gahuh...who should be considering events.”

Sigyn blinks.

“Oh. Oh, you magnificent bastard.”

Loki cackles and coughs, in intervals. It’s been a long time since a scheme was so successful. Not since Angrboda, in fact.

Well, that might be a bad example, he thinks.

Sigyn is clearly a better woman than Angrboda, he thinks.

He’ll be happy with her, he thinks.

There is no limit to stupidity.

Verse 51

“This is an anachronism”, Aphrodite notes, tapping a finger on the refrigerator door.

Hermes waves a hand dismissively. “No one will notice. What do you want for lunch?”

“Hmmm.” Now she puts a finger on her lips, contemplatively. “Ice cream.”

Hermes opens the door, revealing a space absolutely full of ice cream in a profusion of varieties.

“No wait!”

He closes it again.

“We should eat something healthier after that breakfast. Fruits and vegetables.”

Then he opens it again. This time, it’s full of the freshest and most appealing produce imaginable, as though an entire garden had grown inside the refrigerator itself, and everything in it, by coincidence, has just this moment reached perfect ripeness.

“Then again, we’ve been through a lot; if now’s not the time for a treat, what is? Maybe pie. Lots of pie.”

The refrigerator contains pie.

Lots of pie.

Aphrodite regards it.

Hermes regards Aphrodite.

“I was just kidding about the pie, ’cause, you know. But now I actually kind of want pie.”

Hermes spreads an arm.

It’s right there.

“Question. Can you magic calorie-free pie that tastes like real pie?”

“You would think so, but, no.”

Aphrodite removes a pie. It smells like all good things put together, and it’s delightfully warm, fresh out of the oven. Which is clearly cheating.

“Second question. How are you not an enormous lardass?”

When she looks at Hermes again, he’s wider than he is tall, as morbidly obese as anyone can be without completely losing the ability to stand. As is, he only needs two sturdy canes. Aphrodite does a double take, and then he’s model-fit, with a waist even thinner than Sif’s.

“You are such complete bullshit”, she declares, affectionately.

Ultimately, in deference to cultural sensitivity, they have cod stew and bread. It’s pretty good. Not pie good.

Aphrodite places a serving outside Sif’s door.

“Aphrodite?”

“Yeah?”

“...could I talk to you?”

“Sure.”

She picks the stew up again, walks through the door to give it directly to Sif, who is sitting on her bed, looking small and harrowed. She sits down next to her.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“It smells wonderful.”

“It’s pretty good.”

“Did you cook it?”

“Nope!”

“Then—”

“Magic.”

Sif nods, taking a bite. It IS wonderful.

Aphrodite kicks her feet.

“...do you want some?”, Sif asks, and immediately feels ridiculous for asking.

“Already ate.”

There’s an awkward silence.

“Do you love Hermes?”

“Truly and deeply.”

Sif nods again, trying, and failing, to feign nonchalance.

After another appropriately awkward silence: “Do you love Hephaestus?”

Aphrodite raises an eyebrow. “Deeply and truly.”

“HOW?!”

Sif is looking straight at her for the first time since she walked into the room, and she looks so sincerely baffled, all Aphrodite can do is laugh.

"I love more than one man!"

"Did you love ALL of them?"

"Hell yes I loved all of them."

"What's WRONG with you? What's wrong with ME?!", she shrieks, dropping her spoon and staring at her hands as though they were clots of writhing worms.

Aphrodite stares at her in disbelief.

"Seriously?"

"Yes! This is serious! Are we cursed, or—none of this makes sense!"

Aphrodite puts an arm around Sif's shoulder, and kisses her cheek, which should be safe.

"Sif, you're adorable."

Sif is plainly upset, but it's an engaged sort of upset. Not the raw, abstracted mood she was in a few hours ago. She's in turmoil, but she's grounded enough to keep eating stew between outbursts.

"Do you STILL love all of them?"

"Eh."

Aphrodite wobbles a hand uncertainly. "Comes and goes."

"Love doesn't WORK like that!"

Aphrodite gasps. "It doesn't?"

"No! It doesn't! It can't!"

"It can't? The world would just end if it did?"

"The world would just END. It would stop ever having existed!"

"How come?"

Sif gesticulates wildly.

Words fail to happen.

She tries again: "Because that isn't LOVE. I don't know what that is. It's lust, that's what it is. Really powerful lust. So powerful it tricks you into thinking it's love, because you don't think anything else could be so—so MUCH."

"This is priceless. This is the cutest thing I have ever seen. Sif, you have to let me bring Hermes in here."

She cringes. "No!"

"Aaagh." Aphrodite bites her lip, bounces on the bed. It's a wonder nobody's spilled the stew, yet. "Okay. You know I'm literally the goddess of love, though,

right?”

“...I didn’t know that. Are you?”

“I am literally the goddess of love.”

Sif’s face contorts into a series of uncomfortable-looking shapes.

“I know what love is.”

“Better than I do? I’m not trying to brag or anything, but you’re at a major disadvantage here.”

“I...magic. We use the same word, but it has a different meaning for you than it does for me. Hermes said your magic has to do with perception, and mine with intention. Maybe it’s like that with love, too. Your love isn’t my love.”

“Well, you’ve got me there.”

Sif blinks. “I do?”

“Yeah. No two loves are alike. That’s love rule number one.”

“Then—you’re okay. You’re just...different from me. But I’m not supposed to have this love. It’s wrong for me.”

“Who says?”

“No one says! It’s wrong. It’s inherently wrong.”

“No one says? You’re saying.”

“I shouldn’t HAVE to!”

“Suppose you’re right. What are you going to do about it? Stop loving?”

Sif makes an incoherent noise.

“Yeah, I thought so. Love is love. It doesn’t matter if it’s wrong. It can’t be wrong, really. That’s love rule number one.”

“You said no two loves are alike is love rule number one!”

“Psh! Love doesn’t have rules. That’s love rule number one!”

At the other side of the house on the hill, Hermes, who is playing increasingly elaborate games with a handful of pebbles that move and reshape at a thought from him, hears a loud, gurgling wail.

Aphrodite sits down next to him a few minutes later.

She is covered in cod stew.

Calmly, she says: “Your turn.”

Hermes gingerly enters Sif's room.

She's sitting on her bed, looking horribly agitated and embarrassed, unable to figure out what to do with her hands.

"May I sit?"

"Y-yes. Please. I'm sorry about—I wanted to clean it up, the undine's spell makes it easy, but Aphrodite made me put it back on her because she thought it was funny."

"Aah. Now it makes sense."

"Did—what did she tell you?"

"She refused to tell me anything except to insist that you are perfectly nice and the very picture of emotional stability and I'll get along swimmingly with you, so I should speak with you at once. She was adamant that any delay is unacceptable."

"She wanted me to talk to you earlier. And she wanted to be here too, but—I can't do that right now. I'm not a picture of emotional stability. I'm a mess. I'm barely holding myself together, and Aphrodite is...overwhelming."

"I know what you mean."

Sif looks at the man sitting next to her. Studies him studying her. He's so...quick. Once he knew the way to gain the gnome's spell, he INFERRED the other three. It couldn't have taken him more than a second. And now his full attention is on Sif. What is he inferring about her?

"...you're overwhelming, too."

"In a different way, though, right?"

"Right."

"Aphrodite is the type to push forward relentlessly, only picking up the bare essentials of what she needs as she goes. I, on the other hand, have to pick up every little thing, sort them all out so I know what they are in relation to each other, and then, before I'm ready to go on, I have to invent new things until I'm convinced I understand the general principle of things. I'm relentless in precisely the opposite way."

"...and I'm...relentful."

"Not a word. Also, not you. You're the same type as me."

"Oh. I—no, Hermes. You're a genius. I'm not."

Hermes effortfully restrains himself from pointing out that Sif just called him

a genius and disagreed with him in the space of two sentences.

Instead, he says, “Genius is a faculty, not a type. Everyone can do genius, with practice. It just comes out differently depending on who you are. In my opinion, Aphrodite’s genius beats mine. Which would mean she beats yours too, sorry to say, because yours and mine are similar.”

Sif blushes ferociously. “H-how—why do you say that?”

“You’ve been in here thinking all day, haven’t you?”

“...I have.”

“I’ve been doing the same thing out there. Different subject matter, I’m sure, but you clearly have the misfortune of sharing my cognitive architecture. Did you make any headway?”

“No. Did you?”

“No.” He idly watches some arcs of electricity play across his fingers.

Sif gapes. “Did you—is that another spell?!”

“Turns out there are more than four kinds of elemental. I haven’t figured out any pattern to them, though. Water and air are virtually the same thing. One’s more hydrogen, the other’s more nitrogen, but they’re both plenty of oxygen. I thought it might be one elemental per phase of matter, but fire throws that completely out the window—it isn’t even a substance at all, just a reaction. Though, I suppose I should never say ‘just’ a reaction, anymore. Combustion. Oxidation. Oxygen seemed to keep coming up, even in earth. Silicon dioxide. I thought that might have something to do with it, but what’s the connection between oxygen and lightning? Electrostatic discharge can happen between anything and anything else, as long as there are electrons involved. And if there’s an elemental for each electromagnetic epiphenomenon, most of them must be very good at hiding. Much moreso than the little zappy fellows, who predictably like to hang out in storm clouds.”

Sif listens in blatant awe, clearly understanding virtually none of what she hears.

“So, what did you make no progress on?”, Hermes asks.

Her expression becomes pained.

“The trick is to think aloud.”

“...I can’t.”

“Not possible. You have an inner monologue and the power of speech. Just cut out the filter in between.”

“I would be mortified! I’m much more of a fool than you think I am, Hermes. Even I think my thoughts are inane, I can’t imagine what you would think.”

“If you’re a bigger fool than I am, I will be tremendously impressed.”

“How can you say that?!”

He shrugs, helplessly. It’s possible to mess up so badly that you can’t even explain what you did in anything less than a whole series of long conversations over tea.

Sif and Hermes both look forward at nothing for a while, not speaking. After a while, not even visibly aware of the other’s presence. Hermes’s expression: controlled. Sif’s: turbulent.

“I always thought love was like giving someone your heart.”

Suddenly all of Hermes’s attention—considerably more than what he’d allocated up to now—is on Sif. Outwardly, it’d take a keen eye to notice the difference. He doesn’t dare say anything, yet, or turn his head.

“Which means you can only love one person. You only have one heart to give. But that already makes no sense. You can love your children as well as your spouse. It isn’t the same kind of love, but it’s still love. You don’t give your children your spleen, or anything like that. It doesn’t make any sense that way. You can love all your children no matter how many you have. So a mother’s love isn’t like a wife’s love. Parental love isn’t like romantic love. But: what if you have romantic love for more than one person?”

Neither looks at the other. “Split your heart into equal portions?”

Sif laughs abruptly. “That’s exactly what I thought! But you can’t split your heart, you’ll die, and no one who loves you would want you to die, so what then? Grow more hearts? How many hearts can you add before you’re just a monster and what you have isn’t love anymore? Two hearts is already something out of a ghost story. Beating out of sync with each other. Ba-bump-ump, bump ump-ba-bump. Horrible! Then, three hearts? Four? It’s only a metaphor, but it’s an ugly metaphor, and I can’t imagine what it’s a metaphor FOR. But I’m experiencing it, and it’s making me sick, and I don’t know what to do. I have two hearts. I can’t—I can’t just—”

“You can’t rip out one heart to stop being a monster. That isn’t any less ugly. Plus, how would you choose?”

“How would I CHOOSE?”, Sif wails. “That’s beyond everything! I’d sooner die than choose. Or be a monster.”

“What’s so bad about being a monster, anyway?”

“I’ve met monsters.”

“Some of my best friends are monsters.”

“The faceless man, he’s a monster. Sigyn...might be. Not the same kind of monster, if she is. I think she chooses to be monstrous, but the faceless man—Apsu—is just...like that. I don’t want to be like either of them.”

“What other kinds of monsters are there?”

“Trolls. Giants. I’ve never met a giant. Are giants monsters? Or are they just...really large? Is that enough to make a monster? Thor would fight them all the time, but he doesn’t just fight monsters. I don’t think giants are inhuman, otherwise...maybe mentally. I don’t know. Bears. I should be able to think of more monsters than this, there must be hundreds of kinds.”

“What makes a monster?”

“...no humanity.”

Another period of silence. Shorter, this time. Sif, again, breaks it.

“That’s not right. It can’t just be a lack of humanity, because there are so many different kinds of monsters. They aren’t all monstrous in the same way. They’re as different from each other as people are. They—maybe that’s it? Maybe there’s a way to be monstrous for every way to be human.”

“One vice per virtue.”

“Kind of...but...you can have lots of virtues. I don’t think anyone is human in more than one way.”

“What does it mean to be human?”

“To love”, Sif answers, without any hesitation.

Then she thinks about what she’s said.

“...no two loves are alike.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“From Aphrodite?”

“I never quite understood what she meant, until just now.”

“If everyone is human in a different way—”

“—and to be human means to love—”

“—that means everyone loves differently”, Sif finishes, breathlessly.

A knock on the door.

Sif blinks. She and Hermes are looking right into each others’ eyes, their faces very close together. When did that happen? Sif pulls away. “Come in!”, she says, in a surprisingly high-pitched voice.

Aphrodite pokes her head in. “I’m going to bed! Are either of you two love birds going to join me?”

Sif gesticulates, wordlessly.

“Is it that late already?”, Hermes asks.

“You two”, Aphrodite states, pointing at each of them in turn, “are chatter-

boxes.”

“Let me guess: your box needs chattering?”

“Sweet holy Gaia I missed you so much.”

“I’ll be with you momentarily, just let me say goodnight to Sif.”

“I’ll be waiting! Goodnight Sif!”

Sif opens and closes her mouth. Aphrodite departs. “Goodnight Aphrodite!”, she says, after Aphrodite is long gone.

It’s a small house. She probably heard. Probably.

“So. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you with your problem. If it’s any consolation, you just made more progress on mine in less than seven hours than I have in the past seven years. So, thank you for that. And thank you for introducing me to sorcery. In fact: thank you VERY much for introducing me to sorcery. Goodnight Sif.”

Sif watches Hermes levitate perfectly straight up into the air, slowly rotate until he’s upside down, and glide smoothly out of her room, looking back at her with an unreadable expression.

“Goodnight Hermes”, she says, after a while, far too quietly for anyone else to have heard.

Verse 53

Suppose love isn’t anything in itself. Suppose love is just something that happens between loving individuals.

(Bearing in mind that love isn’t ‘just’ anything.)

Now suppose love isn’t even one thing specifically, but an entire category of things, none of which are entirely differentiable from the rest—a vague, indefinite number, not even a number at all, really. A smear of quantity.

Everyone loves at least a little differently; some are more different than others.

One can love more than one other, and each of those loves, too, will be different from each other, and all the rest.

Hermes and Sif, verse 53

Early the next morning, Sif walks outside to watch the sun rise.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

She jumps. Looks around.

“Up here.”

Hermes is on the roof, feet dangling.

“How—oh.”

A breeze carries Sif up to sit next to him.

“No. I couldn’t.”

“Me neither.”

“...I think—”

“That’s the problem, you know. We think too much. There’s a balance to be reached, and I’ve never quite figured out where it is. Whenever I’ve gone ahead without thinking—which is a challenge to begin with—it’s always gone worse than it does the other way around.”

It’s still dark.

“Forgive me; I interrupted. What were you going to say?”

“...I don’t know.”

Time passes.

“Should—do y—am I thinking too much? Am I making you think too much? Should I be quiet?”

“In my experience, no condition is more conducive to thinking than quiet, so I doubt that would achieve the desired effect. Also, I’d rather hear your thoughts, if I’m honest.”

“I think I don’t know what love is.”

“I don’t either.”

“Aphrodite said she’s the goddess of love.”

“She is.”

“Does that mean the way she loves is the right way?”

“You know: I never asked her that question.”

“What—do you think?”

Hermes thinks he already knows what he thinks, but, just to make sure, he takes a moment to think anyway.

“I think I can’t begin to answer what ‘right’ would mean, in this case.”

More time passes.

“Hermes...did you mean what you said?”

“About what?”

“About—me. About how I think. That we think the same way.”

“Yes. It’s fairly obvious.”

“But your thoughts are so clear. Mine are messy and clouded and lead nowhere. You always go straight to a brilliant insight. How can you say we think the same way?”

“Well, there are a few factors at work here. To start with, just because we have the same type of thinking doesn’t mean we’re equally skilled at it. It would be surprising if you’ve spent more time deliberately practicing thought than I have. That said, the difference must be smaller than it appears to you, for several reasons. You can’t see inside my head, so all you’re privy to is the end result of my thought process, which is going to sound quite a bit smarter than the process itself would. Then there’s the fact that I often don’t have to think at all, having already thought about whatever it is a long time ago. Then I can give the answer immediately, like I’m doing now, which makes it look like I think at an inhuman speed, when, in fact, I’m just being lazy. I could go on, but I think the main thing is simply that you’re apt to focus on your shortcomings and ignore mine.”

Sif thinks all of that over.

She focuses on one part in particular.

“...could you teach me?”

“How to think?”

“Yes.”

“Would you rather be smart or happy?”

“W-what?”

“I could teach you, or try, at least, but thinking is a double-edged sword. If you sharpen it, it’ll be all the worse when you inevitably cut yourself. So you have to choose. Smart or happy. That’s essentially the tradeoff involved.”

“...I’m happy when I can make the ones I love happy. I think it would be easier to do that, if I were smarter.”

“Sometimes it is. Other times it isn’t. I took that into account. If the happiness of others implies your own happiness, you can turn it around: if you aren’t happy, they must not be either, because if they were, you would be. So don’t choose smart. Choose happy. Learn what you can from me, but make sure you learn more from Aphrodite.”

Sif and Aphrodite, verse 53

Sif went out for a walk after breakfast. Hermes went out “for further research into sorcery”, i.e., to play.

Aphrodite is draped comfortably over a couch, reading, nearing the end of the little black book.

“I want to learn what love is.”

She peers over the cover.

Sif is standing there, looking as determined as she ever has.

Aphrodite reminds herself: do not have sex with Sif right now. She bites her lip. No. Do not. Pretend she’s underage. She may as well be. The shape of her blouse is just a product of over-eager hormones.

Book shut, legs swung to the ground. “Okay!”

Sif bows. “Aphrodite, goddess of love. Please teach me.”

Aphrodite shivers involuntarily. “Oh man. What is happening right now?”

“Hermes told me I should learn more from you than I do from him. I beseech your aid: my love is broken, and I don’t know how to set things right.”

One hundred percent of that sounds like innuendo.

“Is this quest-mode Sif?” Quest-mode Sif is hot.

“I—I’m—I try to do what Thor would do. It helps, when I have to do something that seems too big for me.”

Too big for her.

Aphrodite crosses her legs and plasters a neutrally affable expression on her face. “Makes sense to me! Sit.” She pats the seat next to her.

Sif sits.

“You want to know what love is?”

Sif nods, firmly.

“Okay then.” Aphrodite clears her throat. “BY MY POWER AS THE GODDESS OF LOVE, I GRANT THEE MY KNOWLEDGE IN AID OF THY QUEST!” She slaps Sif lightly in the forehead. “All right, now you know.”

Sif looks hilariously awed and sincerely joyous for approximately two seconds. Then, a wave of uncertainty passes over her. “U-um.”

“No takebacks.”

Sif shifts uncomfortably.

“What?”

“I—don’t think it worked.”

“That’s ’cause I didn’t do anything.”

“What?!”

“Sif, Sif, Sif. You already know everything about love, you silly billy. What kind of junk has Hermes been telling you?”

“I don’t, Aphrodite! I truly don’t. I love Thor and I love Vali and I don’t see how—how I can live with that. It seems impossible in exactly the same way as my quest has always seemed impossible, and that makes me think it’s what my quest has really been about, all along. I can’t find redemption until I understand. Love isn’t what I thought it was. What is it?”

It would be so easy to demonstrate.

“Imagine Thor.”

Sif’s breath hitches.

“Now imagine Vali.”

Sif winces.

“How do you feel?”

Sif makes a pitiful noise.

“Boom. Love. You know that sick, wrenching feeling that seems to fill up the whole world?”

“I-it’s love?”

“Nope! That’s what it feels like when you DON’T love.”

“I DO love!”, Sif insists, with impressive vehemence.

“You would if you could! You see Thor or Vali around here anywhere?”

“...no.”

“There you go. You have to love them and you can’t. Unstoppable force, immovable object. End result: pain.”

Sif nods slowly.

“...how can I?”

“Now THAT, right there, is the right question.”

Sif looks up, all hope and expectation.

Aphrodite shrugs.

“You don’t know?!”

“In all seriousness: I make it up as I go along. Sometimes, it works!”

“SOMETIMES?!”

Aphrodite shrugs again. Sometimes is a lot.

“What do you do when—it doesn’t work?”

“Try again.”

“Find a new boyfriend.”

Or girlfriend. “Pretty much.”

Or genderqueerfriend.

“I’m married, Aphrodite.”

“I was married to Hephaestus.”

Sif loses the power of speech at an inconvenient time, forcing her to scream a series of nonsense syllables, at Aphrodite and at no one in particular. She springs from the couch like it’s suddenly become hot lava and stomps around the room, continuing to try to form words, loudly. After this has gone on for a while, she marches off to her room and slams the door, officially having reached the emotional maturity of a typical teenager.

Aphrodite nods to herself.

“I think that went well.”

“How so?”

Aphrodite, verse 53

Aphrodite snaps her head to the left—and then up—to see a familiar no-face.

“Shit! You scared me.”

“I apologize.”

They regard each other for a moment.

Aphrodite extends a hand. He shakes it.

“You’re Apsu, right?”

“I am.”

“Did I ever actually introduce myself?”

“You did not.”

“I’m Aphrodite.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Aphrodite.”

“So.”

They’re still shaking hands.

A few more times.

Staring at each other. At least, his head is positioned such that he could be staring at her. She’s just staring at the vertical seam in the middle of his mask.

Bag. Mask.

Huh.

Aphrodite awkwardly disengages from the handshake.

“What brings you to Hermes’s house on the hill?”

“Sif asked me to speak with you.”

Eyebrow.

“...about?”

“Love.”

“Love?”

“Love.”

“I just talked to Sif about love.”

“Yes.”

“She didn’t seem to like what I had to say.”

“No.”

“Why does Sif want you to talk to me about love?”

“She considers you to have been a great help to her with regard to her own experience with love, and she hopes you will help me in a similar fashion.”

Blink.

“...okay.”

Blink. Blink.

Aphrodite waves a hand in front of where she assumes Apsu’s face is.

No reaction.

Inhaling with unconscious apprehension, she slowly reaches for the bottom of his mask. She pinches a piece of cloth. She begins to lift the mask. He gently takes her hand and places it in her lap, remaining otherwise motionless.

He is a pretty spooky guy.

“You’re a pretty spooky guy, Apsu.”

He tilts his head thirty degrees to one side. After two seconds, he returns it to an upright orientation.

She exhales.

“Okay. So. You don’t know what love is either?”

“I do.”

“You do.”

“Yes.”

Aphrodite crosses her arms. “What’s love?”

“Love is love.”

She narrows her eyes.

She points an accusing finger.

“I’m on to you, buddy.”

Apsu crosses his arms in imitation. Prove it, he seems to say.

“You got that from talking to me in the FUTURE. Right?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

Aphrodite lowers her accusing finger.

She drums it. Also, the others.

“You are wondering what the deal is with me”, Apsu guesses.

“That—yeah. Pretty much. What IS the deal with you?”

“Very similar to the deal with you.”

“Really? Because my deal is to bring wholeness and joy to the whole wide world.”

“Mine is broader, but our methods are the same.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“My methods usually involve copious quantities of sexual intercourse.”

“As do mine.”

“I am very good at what I do.”

“As am I.”

“I could probably teach you a thing or two.”

“Regrettably, you couldn’t.”

“I bet I could.”

It takes thirty seconds for Aphrodite to lose her bet, decisively; she can’t take any more than that.

It stopped being FUN after five seconds. She would have called a halt to it then, except for sheer disbelief that he could possibly escalate any further. Too intense. Way, way too intense. The midsummer sun is to a foundering can-

dle what Apsu's thumb is to the final version of the Vibrator of Olympus. Aphrodite's limit has now been measured: one and a half hands and a very creatively applied knee. She's panting for breath, hair plastered to the side of her face with sweat, clothes in unlikely disarray, only just able to gasp out the words, "time out". Apsu, meanwhile, is unperturbed. He withdraws his attention as calmly as he gave it.

For all appearances, none of that did anything for him.

"You have to be kidding me", Aphrodite protests, beginning the process of trying to reassemble herself. It isn't clear how he did this with her panties, or how to undo it. Not clear at all. But there are more important mysteries to solve. "It wasn't good for you either?"

"Not great."

As it turns out, crazily, Apsu shares the same problem Hephaestus's ill-fated invention did: zero mutuality. Now Sif's description of him makes sense: he really isn't a person. He's a masturbation fantasy made flesh. A living wet dream, and Aphrodite isn't the dreamer. She has just experienced something that her natural awesomeness has let her entirely avoid up to now: meaningless sex.

Aphrodite is not a fan.

Still, this wasn't a complete waste. Apsu might not have learned anything, but she certainly did, despite not being a quicker study than average.

Which means—

"I have to introduce you to someone."

"As you like."

Hermes, verse 53

Hermes sits outside the house on the hill, playing in the dirt.

That is: he's trying to use sorcery to separate dirt into sand and clay, and then separate sand into silicon and oxygen, and then use the silicon to build a computer.

So far, he is successfully separating dirt into sand and clay.

Maybe he needs to find the atomic equivalent of an elemental.

A sub-elemental.

Four feet appear in his visual field. Two clad in sandals, two in very formal white shoes. The proportions are off: no one has that shoe size. He looks up.

"Hi Hermes! This is Apsu. Apsu, Hermes. Hermes, Apsu."

Apsu waves. "Have we met?"

Once upon a time, there was a man called Procrustes.

Procrustes sought this: an idea that fits the world.

He approaches a scholar. "I am Procrustes", he says.

"I am Athena. Well met."

"Well met. I seek an idea to fit the world. Can science produce this idea?"

"Science is young. Perhaps later, when more about the world is understood. For now, ask a poet."

He approaches a poet. "I am Procrustes", he says.

"I am Apollo. Well met."

"Well met. I seek an idea to fit the world. Can poetry produce this idea?"

"Words are grand, but for such a work the medium must be grander still. I cannot help you. Ask an artist."

He approaches an artist. "I am Procrustes", he says.

"I am Athena. Well met."

"Well met. Are you not also the scholar I spoke to earlier?"

"I have various interests."

"So it is. I seek an idea to fit the world. Can art produce this idea?"

"Art is constrained by its material. To fit the world in art would require all the material of the world, and more. But music needs no space, only time. Ask a musician."

He approaches a musician. "I am Procrustes", he says.

"I am Apollo. Well met."

"Oh, for crying out loud."

Procrustes despairs of achieving his purpose.

He wanders the world in all its complexity. No idea fits it.

One day he meets a hooded figure at a crossroads. "I am Procrustes", he says.

"Well met."

"I seek an idea to fit the world, but I fear my task is impossible."

"It may be."

Procrustes begins toward the east.

"It is possible to fit the world to an idea, however."

Then Procrustes turns to the west.

“Yes”, Hermes says. “We’ve met.”

Aphrodite observes the ensuing staring match for a few tense seconds.

“So”, she says. “Any chance you two are going to bone?”

“No”, Hermes and Apsu say, simultaneously.

Sif, verse 53

“Sif?”

Sif mumbles, face down in bed.

“Siiiiif.”

“I’m not ready yet.”

“Sif!”

Sif looks up, weary. Aphrodite is in her room. Apsu is also.

“So, I tried to talk to Apsu, but we aren’t exactly on the same wavelength, and Hermes is flatly refusing to have anything to do with him, because it would be, and I quote, ‘like giving napalm to a pyromaniac and looking the other way’. Any advice?”

Sif shrieks. Aphrodite jumps. Apsu is still there.

“WHAT IS HE DOING HERE?! What are you doing here?!”

“You called me in a possible future, and asked me to talk to Aphrodite.”

“Uh”, Aphrodite says.

“NOW?!”

“You didn’t specify a time.”

“You—I—now—”

Sif’s head spins.

“You talked to her?”

“Yes.”

“Because I’m going to ask you to talk to her?”

“No.”

“No no no no oh no. What do you mean no?”

“I mean you won’t ask me to talk to Aphrodite, because I already have, and so you will have no reason to.”

“What—what happens to the possible-future-me that asked, then? What about everyone else in that possible future?”

Apsu holds his hands out to his sides. The question has no meaningful answer.

Sif clamps her eyes shut, shuddering.

“Uhh”, Aphrodite continues.

“Please go away again until I call, Apsu.”

“As you like.”

He goes away, transitionlessly. It is the spookiest of all exits. Aphrodite jumps again. She passes her hand through the space where he was, a few times.

Sif puts her face in her hands.

“What was THAT about?”, Aphrodite finishes.

“I didn’t think he would do anything if I didn’t call him. I didn’t—we don’t have plenty of time, Aphrodite, we have to—Apsu is—we have to talk to Tiamat.”

“Who’s Tiamat?”

Verse 54

“Hermes?”

Hermes mumbles, face down in concentration.

“Hermeeeeees.”

“...raise the temperature, that should...”

“Hermes!”

He looks up, startled. Aphrodite is in the doorway.

“Sif is hyperventilating and I generally freak her out more than anything. Come be a soothing influence.”

He looks down, wistful.

Aphrodite snaps her fingers a couple times. “Hey! Mad sorcery later. Emotional crisis now.”

“All right, all right, I’m coming.”

The earliest memories tend to be forgotten last, and the latest—excepting the absolute most recent—tend to go first. Aside from that, some things, of their nature, are more forgettable than others. Thus it happens that Sif, who has never tasted the waters of Lethe, is alone in the house on the hill in remembering anything whatsoever about Tiamat.

It takes a while to clear up the confusion.

Tiamat, Sif explains, is the one Apsu loves. His sense of right and wrong is derived, ultimately, from her. Tiamat is eccentric. HER sense of right and wrong is...well, she may not have one. This makes Apsu unpredictable, which is a bad thing, as Hermes, who has encountered him on a few occasions before, will attest.

Sif wants to pursue her quest. She wants to redeem herself; she wants to reunite with her husband and her daughter. But, more than that, she wants her husband and daughter to continue existing, and Apsu makes that future uncertain.

“Hey, yeah: you mentioned that before. How exactly is this guy supposed to never-have-existed us, again?”

Aphrodite has a gut instinct that the uncertainty is uncertain.

“It’s...complicated.”

That is to say: Sif isn’t sure she understands it, and explaining it is right out.

“He can’t do that.”

All eyes turn to Hermes.

“The way Apsu interacts with spacetime doesn’t allow him to erase realities you’ve already experienced. The worst he can do is re-frame them. If I had his abilities and I wanted to do what Sif is describing, I’d go back in time, disguise myself as the person I want to eliminate the past and future existence of, and then reveal my identity in the present. That would be bad, but you can’t ever actually prove that he did that to anyone. No matter how much evidence you gather, it could all just be false information fed to you by Apsu himself. For example”, he says, pulling off his incredibly lifelike Hermes-mask to reveal the blank white cloth beneath—

Jaws drop.

Then he removes the white mask of Apsu to reveal the face of Hermes beneath, looking much as he did moments earlier.

“Never do that again”, Aphrodite intones.

Sif nods in fervent agreement.

“I’m just saying. The normal laws of immortality have room to work around him. He can’t do anything more dire or permanent than we can. What he does isn’t all that different from a magic trick, when it comes down to it. I’d be able to do the same thing if I had unlimited foresight. He breaks some rules, but he isn’t omnipotent. In fact, he’s been stopped by mere gods like us on numerous occasions I could name.”

Sif nearly leaps across the table. “Name them please!”

“Athena caught him trying to snuff out the sun, once. She built Apollo a chariot that could catch up to him in space, and that was that.”

“Athena? Apollo?”

“Goddess of methods and god of reason, respectively.”

Aphrodite leans back, smirking at a memory. “Apollo talked him out of it? Okay, I’ll have to give the guy more credit now. Apsu is a brick wall.”

“He said he talked him out of it. Personally, I’m pretty sure he tried and failed, then just ran him over, or something of the sort.”

“Ah. Yeah, that’d make more sense.”

“I killed Apsu once.”

All eyes turn to Sif.

“Um. I burned him. He dropped dead right away, but then he appeared behind me. He didn’t...seem to care. I don’t see how killing him would stop him, even for a moment.”

“It doesn’t work every time”, Hermes allows. “Dionysus—Apollo’s brother, the god of passion —”

Aphrodite gets a dreamy expression.

“—had a rather unpleasant experience with Apsu once. He showed up to a party and just stood in the corner, not moving a muscle, watching. Apparently, no matter what anyone said to him, all he’d say back is ‘this happens too’. Naturally, he creeped everyone out, and put a damper on the festivities. They tried all kinds of things to get him to leave, up to and including killing him, but he’d come back. It got to the point where Dionysus would fly into a rage and beat him to death every time he reappeared, which didn’t take long. It went on for a while.”

Sif’s eyes are wide. “How was he stopped?”

“He wasn’t, that time. He just went away eventually.”

Aphrodite wiggles her fingers and makes spooky ghost noises. Sif shivers.

“I stopped him myself, once. No killing involved.”

Sif is breathless with astonishment. “How?!”

“He was trying to kill my cat, so I put him in a box.”

No one seems sure how to respond to that.

Hermes shrugs. “I liked that cat.”

Sif’s eyes sparkle. Wonder and admiration pour off of her. Aphrodite is inordinately amused, at Hermes, and at Sif’s reaction to Hermes.

“He’s still in the box, as far as I know.”

He can, after all, be in more than one place at once.

By the end of Hermes’s stories, Sif no longer fears Apsu more than death. He’s too dangerous to handle incautiously; but not too dangerous to handle.

And as for Tiamat, Aphrodite claimed she’s dangerous as well—not that she can recall saying so—but she can’t possibly be worse.

It increasingly seems to Sif that the future is bright.

Verse 55

“I say we invite them to dinner”, Aphrodite declares, unprompted.

Sif is taken aback. Hermes, less so.

“Apsu and Tiamat?”

“Why not? All this stuff about Apsu and his mysteriousness has me wondering what he goes for. Besides, Sif wants to talk Tiamat into a code of ethics that forbids eating jewelry that doesn’t belong to her. Particularly jewelry suspected to contain people. Right Sif?”

“...do I have to be the one to talk to her?”

“Still harboring some resentment?”

Sif sets her mouth in a thin line.

“We’ll all talk to her! Hermes is a devastating rhetorician. He talked me into a lake. Tiamat won’t know what hit her.”

“I’m willing to try. I’ve tried influencing Apsu before, more than once, and it never ends well. But I didn’t know about Tiamat.” At least, Hermes doesn’t remember knowing about Tiamat. “And it isn’t as if any contact with Apsu is automatically disastrous. That rule seems peculiar to me. Others have had significantly more luck, and it sounds like Sif is one of the luckier ones. The luckiest I know of, if he’s been honest with her. Not to mention, if Aphrodite thinks it’s a good idea, I’m inclined to go along with her.”

This is how that goes.

Verse 56

On one side of the table sits Aphrodite, Hermes, and Sif. On the other side sits Apsu and Tiamat.

There seems to be a growing competition between Aphrodite and Apsu to see which can fondle the one beside them more blatantly, without Sif noticing

anything too untoward. It's sufficiently distracting that Aphrodite is barely touching her dinner. Apsu hasn't touched his at all. Between this and Sif's reticence at the prospect of engaging the man in white or the woman in black, the conversation is dominated by Hermes and Tiamat, both of whom seem to have attention to spare.

"Are you enjoying the food?"

"It's good."

"I'm glad. I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I prepared a bit of everything."

"Mm."

The table is suspiciously longer than Sif remembers. She's pretty sure it wouldn't have had room for three on a side before, normally, although it might have worked with Aphrodite crushed against Hermes the way she is, so it may only be a trick of perception, but the spread laid out on it is less credible. Sif isn't even sure what half of these dishes are.

"So, how long have you two known each other?"

"A while."

"How did you meet?"

"Easily."

The trick to getting Tiamat to respond with something other than a neutral 'mm' of acknowledgement is fairly simple. Hermes hasn't figured out how to get her to respond with more than a handful of words, yet.

"What are you interested in?"

"Everything."

"Aha. Our interests are the same. You wouldn't happen to be a magician, would you?"

Tiamat's smile broadens for a moment. "No."

"I could teach you some tricks later, if you'd like."

"You couldn't."

Hermes leans forward, intrigued. "Why not?"

"Magic is not in my nature."

Four, five...six words. That's a record.

"Hey!" Aphrodite straightens. "Haaang on a minute."

She pulls out the little black book, flipping through a few pages before pressing a finger into one, triumphantly.

"I've got a magic trick to see into the nature of things."

Hermes gapes at her. “You’re learning magic?”

“Don’t get excited. Two tricks! And I’m terrible at this one.”

“Try”, says a deep voice.

Aphrodite narrows her eyes in concentration, trying to peer into the nature of Tiamat.

“Nope. I got nothin’, just like always. I’m pretty sure this is the absolute hardest trick for me to learn. The other one’s probably the easiest. It’s that kind of book.”

Hermes nods sagely. “Magical aptitudes are highly personal. What’s the other one?”

Aphrodite elects not to demonstrate, having more important things to do. “Talking to animals”, she says, snuggling in again.

“I’ve never been much good at that”, admits the first and greatest magician. “Which would seem to imply...Sif, why don’t you try?”

Sif startles. “I don’t know how.”

“It’s simple. Just ignore all the details.”

Aphrodite frowns. That is significantly more enlightening than anything in the full page of instructions she’s read and re-read. Stupid little black book.

Sif frowns. “But—everything is details.”

“Not quite everything. Here, try this first”, he offers, setting a thing of salt in front of Sif. “It’s less subtle than a living, thinking, feeling being. Easier to apprehend.”

The book could’ve pointed that out, too.

“What do I do?”

“Just look.”

Sif looks, and, for a moment, neglects to notice the incidental details. She sees into the nature of salt. She blinks. A couple details enter her awareness: it is a small bowl of coarse-grained salt. Salt is not intrinsically coarse-grained, nor intrinsically contained in small bowls. This salt isn’t perfectly salty. It is a flawed approximation of Salt. The flaws, though, are minuscule. There’s a reason why salt is associated with purity. Sif is nearly overwhelmed by the sheer saltiness of the experience.

“Oh”, she breathes. “It’s salt.”

Aphrodite purses her lips. She’d been trying, too. It sure is...salt.

Hermes laughs, remembering something from long ago—as clearly as if it happened yesterday. “I think we’ve just confirmed that your aptitudes are similar

to mine.”

Sif snaps out of her salt-trance to look up at Hermes, and blush.

“Now try looking at Tiamat.”

Sif looks at Tiamat.

“...I don’t see anything.”

“Subtler natures take more practice. You’ll be able to see into the nature of air, eventually. That’s a trippy experience. Although...I suppose I should have thought of this earlier, but this does fall under the category of ‘learning to think like Hermes’. Sorry. You should make sure to spend more time with Aphrodite to cancel it out.”

Aphrodite laughs. “You’re trying to keep her from becoming you?”

“It’s a fate I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy”, Hermes answers—with a note of sarcasm, to hide his sincerity. “I’m afraid it might be a foregone conclusion for Sif, though. All we can do is mitigate the damage.” More blushing. “In the meantime, I suppose the task of discovering Tiamat’s nature falls to me.”

Hermes looks.

He looks for some time.

Such intense, protracted ogling should make anyone uncomfortable, but it seems only to have that effect on Sif, and, to a lesser extent, Aphrodite, neither of whom are the object of scrutiny, nor the object’s significant other.

“...I don’t see anything, either.”

Tiamat smiles.

Verse 57

Seeing Apsu together with Tiamat is surreal.

There are times when Sif can almost convince herself that they’re an ordinary couple, but, even in their interactions with each other, there are little things...off.

He’s as attentive as Thor. Moreso, even; he almost never looks away from her, rarely leaves her without at least one point of contact—hand on thigh or arm around waist—and even then, it seems he only frees himself to serve her something or other from the gradually diminishing mini-banquet as she makes room. Everything he does, he does for her; everything she does, she does for herself. She hasn’t once given him so much as an affectionate glance, let alone any overt show of appreciation, as long as Sif has been watching. Tiamat’s attention is on anything and anyone but Apsu. It’s bizarre, and vaguely appalling; she takes him for granted, if she cares about him at all, and Apsu’s mask makes his feelings—assuming he has feelings—unknowable. Is he happy

like this?

Sif finds herself feeling a pang of sympathy for him, unsure if he's even able to recognize the strange emptiness of his relationship with Tiamat. The longer she watches, the harder it becomes to think of what she's seeing as love; even love between monsters. It looks more like servitude, and topsy-turvy servitude, at that.

But Sif is a monster, too. She loves more than one man. Are these two any more strange than that?

She tries to understand.

Imagine that Thor never asks Sif to marry him. Instead of sweeping her off her feet and making her his, he makes himself hers. Subject to her whim, even subject to faint impressions of what he guesses her whim might be. And what she gives him in return: nothing. She takes all his gifts without showing any gratitude, and expects more as a matter of course. She might even be disappointed if he gave her less than everything she wanted. And if he asked her for something for himself? What would Tiamat do if Apsu asked her for a back rub? Ignore him? Say, "I don't feel like it, rub my back instead"?

Yes.

That would be more strange.

Loving Thor and Vali is like seeing double, but each vision, distinctly, is of love. The world where Thor bends his will to Sif's is not a world Sif wants to live in. The thought fills her with horror. She wouldn't know what to do; she would wilt. Especially because he wouldn't be Thor. He would be a smothering sycophant. He would give her the world, but Sif doesn't want the world. All she wants is for Thor—and Thrud—to be happy.

And all Thor wants is Sif's love.

What does Apsu want?

What does Tiamat?

Hermes is saying: "Let me get this straight."

"Mm?"

He's trying to figure out her morality.

The small talk ended hours ago.

"You have a cage with a bear inside. On one side of the bear, there's one person. On the other, five people. You can open the cage on one side or the other, to let the people on that side go free, but then the bear will kill everyone on the opposite side. So, you can save one person or five. Or none, if you don't open the cage at all. You don't have a preference?"

"No."

“No preference at all?”

Tiamat weighs the options in her mind.

One thing may happen, or another thing, or a third thing. She likes things. It isn't a difficult question.

“None.”

Hermes throws his hands up in exasperation.

“Tiamat...”

Everyone turns to Sif.

(Except for Apsu, whose focus does not waver.)

“...what is good?”

“Everything.”

“What is bad?”

“Nothing.”

Hermes mentally kicks himself.

She continues: “What do you want?”

Tiamat points to her side. “Him.”

Both Sif and Hermes find this a perplexing non-sequitur. How do you respond to that?

Aphrodite says to Tiamat: “High five.”

Clap.

Verse 58

Hermes jumps in.

“Do you want anything else?”

Tiamat smiles.

“Everything.”

“But you can't have everything.”

Her smile vanishes, with surprising suddenness, replaced by something very like the expression of one who has just remembered she already ate the last piece of pie, only far more profound. No one in attendance suspects that's the reason for a moment, despite the fact that the pie is, in fact, long gone.

“No”, she admits. She can't have everything.

“So you have to choose. How do you choose?”

Then the corners of her mouth begin to draw upward again.

“Rarely.”

She can, at least, have every possible thing.

Hermes frowns. “That isn’t exactly an answer.”

“It is inexact”, Tiamat agrees, absently.

Hermes squints. Opens his mouth; closes it. Finds himself deeply affected for no reason he can discern. But Sif jumps in again to take his place before the silence stretches on long enough for her or Aphrodite to notice his disquiet.

“Do you want to be good?”

“Yes.”

“Then—why did you eat my locket?!”

“I wanted to.”

“That wasn’t good, Tiamat!”

Tiamat smiles.

“It was very bad!”

She betrays no contrition.

“She wants to be bad too”, Aphrodite points out, with remarkable restraint. It doesn’t seem like an appropriate time for a ‘bad girl’ joke.

“You can’t want both! Tiamat—do you care about other people at all?”

“No.”

Perfectly casual. Almost friendly, even. Reporting a fact she ascribes no particular importance to.

“What about Apsu?”

Tiamat shrugs happily.

Sif is aghast.

In desperation, she turns to the other one.

“Apsu, what do YOU want?”

“Nothing.”

“But—you love Tiamat, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you want her to be happy?”

“I do.”

“Then...I’m confused.”

Hermes interjects: “What do you want in the sense that you want things?”

“What Tiamat wants.”

“Whatever she wants?”, he presses.

“Whatever she wants.”

“What if she wants you dead?”

“Then I would be dead.”

Hermes waits for Apsu to be swallowed up by the abyss, slain by a twist of logic.

While he’s waiting, Sif asks, quietly: “...are you happy?”

There is a pause.

Apsu continues to not die.

“Extremely”, he claims, without affect.

“Why?”

“Love.”

Sif reaches the point where she simply can’t believe, anymore, that anyone can be like this. Like either of them.

“How can you be like this?!”

She addresses Apsu and Tiamat both.

She thinks she does, anyway. She would be less vehement if her words were meant only for them.

“I don’t understand you! You can’t! It—you—love isn’t LIKE this. Love isn’t anything like this! You don’t love each other! How could you?!”

They look at each other.

Apsu is the one who answers.

“We don’t.”

Aphrodite blurts out: “What?”

“We don’t love each other. I love Tiamat. She feels differently.”

“That—huh? What?” Aphrodite takes a moment to articulate her inquiry more carefully: “What.”

Hermes steeples his fingers, thinking.

Sif attempts to reconcile the facts, and fails.

Unrequited love is perfectly normal, if awful. That isn't the paradox.

Aphrodite tries one more time, leveling a finger at Tiamat, then Apsu, then Tiamat again. "How can you be like this?"

Prompting Sif to burst, "EXACTLY!"

Tiamat gives another shrug, enormously pleased. Her descendants are confused about even the most obvious things! She sets down her fork on her empty plate.

Then she turns to face Apsu.

She seizes his head in her hands, tears his mask open and kisses him messily in virtually the same motion. He responds instantly, snaking an arm around the small of her back, pressing forward, over her, squeezing until she arches backward into a crescent, and escalating from there.

Sif is too shocked to do anything, and Hermes only furrows his brow studiously as events take place, but Aphrodite progresses through a series of reactions.

First: "Whoa!"

Then: "Aww. They do love each other."

And: "Wow. They REALLY love each other."

But: "Uh. Wha..."

There's a gulp.

"...huh."

It didn't even take thirty seconds.

On one side of the table sits Aphrodite, Hermes, and Sif. On the other side sits Tiamat.

Verse 59

Sif stares across the table.

Between the five of them—Sif, Hermes, Aphrodite, Apsu, and Tiamat—they managed to clear the table in just an hour or two, which would have been an improbable feat of gluttony even if everyone had been shoveling mouthfuls as fast as they could instead of having a deep, involved conversation. And, in retrospect, Tiamat had to have been stealthily responsible for far more than her fair share. There's no way to make the amounts add up without at least one person at the table taking an inhumanly large portion. Sif knows she didn't. Hermes was too focused on the conversation to do more than pick at his food. Aphrodite ate even less than he did. She's been distracted all evening, for some reason. And Apsu might not have eaten anything; he didn't remove his mask,

at least, until—so most of it had to have gone to Tiamat. How she did it without Sif catching her in the act is a mystery. She shouldn't have been able to eat that much to begin with.

She certainly shouldn't have had room for more.

Hermes assesses the situation.

Tiamat is sitting there, head lolled back, holding her belly, her face utterly serene except for the odd twitch of ecstasy. Drooling a little. She has gained suspiciously little weight. Apparently none at all, in fact, despite concerted and conspicuous consumption throughout the evening. Evidently, even swallowing something almost-but-not-quite the same size she is—or someone—has no impact on her figure whatsoever. Her dress is suffering as much as it ever was. This is, on the face of it, volumetrically impossible. It seems Tiamat experiences space differently.

One mystery solved.

Apsu steps out from around the corner, sits unobtrusively in his former position, and interlaces his fingers in front of him as though nothing especially untoward has happened. Which it hasn't.

That was only a kiss.

Aphrodite is slack-jawed with astonishment.

Sif can't breathe. She says: "I can't breathe."

"Let's go outside for some air", Hermes suggests, reasonably. "We can see the stars before bed. You two are welcome to stay the night, if you'd like. There's a room for you."

There wasn't, before they arrived.

"I'd...ngh!...like that", Tiamat manages to say.

"Go ahead", Apsu adds. "We will stay in. Good night."

Hermes pulls the tablecloth off with a flourish, without disturbing any dishes, leaving a perfectly clean surface. The only thing on the table is a small bowl of coarse-grained salt.

The younger gods walk out into the cool night air, a little unsteady on their feet, while the elder gods remain.

Despite a nagging, unaccountable feeling of claustrophobia—as though the universe were enclosed, and the walls were pressing in a little closer than before—none of them quite feel like being alone, right now.

They walk around the hill together in silence, until Hermes breaks it.

"I don't think—"

“No”, Sif answers.

Words won’t influence Tiamat.

“Could we twist her arm?”

“...I don’t think Apsu would like that.”

“He likes what she likes, and she likes everything.”

“That—maybe”, Sif allows. “But...she’s very strong, too.”

Hermes modifies his idea. “Could Thor twist her arm?”

“Yes”, Sif answers, without having to think about it. “But Thor is broken. Or—he will be. And he won’t be, if I can ever complete my quest. Maybe if—”

“No. I’m even less inclined to get clever with Apsu’s abilities than you are. I’m calling the Thor contemporary with your point of departure the real Thor and I strongly advise against having any interaction of any kind with any other Thors. I much prefer the idea of helping you finish your quest quickly, since that will be easy, and then seeing if there’s anything to be done about those two from there, or if we just have to accept living in a world where a faceless force of nature is constantly complicating everything in ways that can’t reliably be predicted or prevented.”

Sif missed the second half of that. “Easy?!”

“Easier than you expect”, Hermes hedges. “I’m going on the assumption that your goals are essentially aligned with love, and, as I learned from someone who ought to know, love conquers all. What do you say, Aphrodite? A subjective afternoon of effort to fix a marriage, given help from the god of change, the goddess of love, and judicious use of time travel?”

“All this time I thought I knew what ‘deep throat’ meant.”

Sif and Hermes stare, nonplussedly, at Aphrodite.

“I mean, holy shit”, she clarifies. “Right?”

Verse 60

Sleep is elusive in the house on the hill.

If it can be found at all, it is restless, haunted by dreams of vastness.

The night’s ruminations are brought to light in the morning, discussed in the afternoon, haggled over in the evening.

The pattern threatens to repeat, then Sif says an incautious thing, and the plan is obsolete before it is formed.

Thor, verse 60

“Not even marriage can outweigh love!”

Thor’s arms uncross, seemingly of their own accord.

Now, that is odd. These arms are his faithful servants. They have brought down giants and held titans at bay. Why would they be going limp in a mere conversation with his beautiful wife? He hasn’t experienced such a thing since—

Since—

He brushes the issue aside; the present moment demands his attention. His wife has just said a strange thing.

He asks, confused: “Love outweighs marriage?”

She looks as confused by her own words as he is, and does not respond. He attempts to voice her thoughts on her behalf.

“But that is meaningless. How could marriage and love be opposed to begin with?”

She still looks confused. Though, no: perhaps not. What is this expression? Is this—dismay?

“Beloved wife, what’s wrong?”

She shakes her head. “I have the best husband and most perfect child in all the world. How could anything be wrong?”

But her voice is strange.

“Something is wrong. What disturbs you?”

Sif is quiet.

“Something disturbs you. Are you well?”

Now this is truly concerning. Thor and Sif have the happiest of all marriages. What could be the cause of her disturbance? Look now: her eyes moisten. Her lips quiver. A flash of rage: who is responsible for this crime? For Thor, there is no worse agony than to see Sif in distress. He hasn’t experienced such a thing since—

Since—

A single tear falls.

Thor hasn’t experienced such a thing since before his daughter was born.

Since the first—and last—time he failed.

Since the monster Vali had his way with Sif, and escaped retribution for his theft.

But is that how it was?

One cannot steal what is given freely.

He hears himself state, "Love outweighs marriage", and he doesn't recognize his voice. It is as though his own restless shade were speaking through him from a future grave.

Or a past one.

"Thor. Thor, no. Please."

Sif's pleas do not fall on deaf ears.

To ask what Thor must ask next will be the worst of all his deeds.

But he must hear her answer. Though he knows that it can only be, "of course not", he must hear it from her lips. He will have no peace if he holds his tongue. He must ask. He cannot do otherwise.

It is an unfamiliar feeling, for Thor, to be so weak.

So it is that he asks his wife, whose love gives life meaning, even knowing it will hurt her to see his doubt laid bare: "Do you love Vali?"

And a great gulf of time stretches out before the once-mighty Thor, and his question is answered only by silence.

His blood leaves him.

The world seems to lose its color, too.

Sif covers her mouth. She turns. She runs away, trailing her golden hair behind her.

Thor could catch her easily.

There seems no reason to do this thing.

She loves Vali. Perhaps she will find him.

Perhaps she will find happiness, at last.

Thor is unsure of how long he spends simply standing where he stood, then. There seems no reason to keep track, no more than there is reason to move.

A hand sets itself on his shoulder, and he experiences a new dread: the hand can only belong to Thrud.

But it does not.

When he turns his head, he sees a figure dressed in white.

He turns forward again, not interested in seeing the face of this intruder.

"I would know who it is I am about to destroy. Name yourself."

"I am named Apsu. Have we met?"

Thor allows his arm to fall by his side again. His knuckles are sullied by blood and bones and brains. He doesn't bother to clean them. He didn't bother to look at what he was doing, either. He only bothered with the act of raising a fist to begin with because it was easier than the alternative. Perhaps this is his life now: the path of least effort, where once it was the reverse.

The hundreds of identical masked men that follow warrant even less attention than the first.

Thor only comes to his senses again when it occurs to him that Thrud might be inconvenienced by an impassable wall of gore and corpses in the dining hall.

He glances about. Still as surrounded by faceless foes as he was however many minutes or hours ago. Their numbers seem not to diminish, and some magic allows them to ignore the physical impediment posed by their fallen, passing through the dead as though they were not there. The living, too. There: that one seems to split into two, as though there had been two all along, only coinciding in the same space, their movements perfectly synchronized up to the moment that one steps left while the other steps right. Possibly that is the true explanation. In any case, they are immaterial to each other, though solid enough to Thor's fists. Yet they do not attack, nor register fear, nor do anything else but calmly refill the ranks that Thor dispatches.

"I wonder at what kind of beings you are, that you crowd in to be slaughtered endlessly. What is your purpose?"

"I am here to show you the past", one of them says.

Thor crosses his arms. "Only you?"

"Yes."

He punches that one's head across the room.

"Now the rest of you can leave."

They do not.

"Hmph. What is it now?"

"The same."

"You", says Thor, pointing at the one who spoke. "What is your name?"

"Apsu."

He points at another. "And yours?"

"Apsu."

"Is every one of you named Apsu?"

"Yes", they all say, in unison.

"What sorcery is this?"

“No sorcery. I will explain, later, if you come with me.”

“To be shown the past?”

“Yes.”

Which is easier: to dwell on the past, which is halcyon but unreachable, or to wait for the future, which is bleak?

A long bony finger reaches to touch Thor’s forehead, and he does not resist.

A vision of Sif, beautiful Sif, appears.

“Why do you still care for him?”

Loki is there as well. For some reason.

“He’s my husband. I’m his wife. I love him.”

Ah. So, it will not be a pleasant vision. Hearing the conviction with which Sif lies to herself breaks Thor’s heart anew.

“How can you possibly still love him? Look at him.”

Thor’s shade sits nearby. Loki approaches, shakes the shade’s shoulder, and nearly topples the wretched, unresisting thing.

Belatedly, Thor realizes that he remembers this, and his shade is only acting the part he himself played.

“Am I truly such a miserable creature, Apsu?”

Apsu extends his hands to either side in a shrug. He’s helpless to answer that sort of question.

“You’ve really broken him. Is that it? Is it guilt that keeps you chained to this oaf of an iron ball?”

It is obvious that the shades of the past have no awareness of Thor or his guide. Loki was wise, it turns out. If only Sif had listened to him.

“It’s love.”

Thor winces. Loki speaks for him, nearly:

“Good grief, woman. This is perverse. Perhaps you LIKE him this way.”

But no: she did not listen. She raised Mjolnir as he didn’t know she could, and now her shade imitates her, laying Loki’s shade to waste.

Thor’s shade looks faintly impressed.

“Why show me this, Apsu? I remember my past.” All too clearly, now.

“This is when Sif’s quest began.”

At this Thor arches an eyebrow. “Quest?”

Sif's shade, having dropped the hammer, flees in embarrassment. Loki's shade writhes on the ground; he'll crawl away eventually, but evidently that is not part of this vision. Apsu extends his hand again, and takes Thor to another memory, but this time it is not his.

A golden-haired woman sits on her bed, staring before her at Mjolnir.

"Would you like to hear her thoughts?"

Thor's mouth goes dry. He says nothing, too overcome to speak, but the man in white acquiesces as if he had.

He hears Sif's sweet voice, though her lips—her shade's lips—do not move. Her words seem to fade in and out, and overlap at times.

She's thinking about Thor.

Considering staying with him. Taking care of him. Wearing herself down to dust, to bring some small, ashen comfort to the man she thinks she loves. Consigning herself to misery for all the rest of her days.

"NO!", Thor shouts. But she can't hear him. He's more than fifteen years distant.

She blames herself, for everything. She blames Thor for nothing.

"No", he says again, more quietly.

She asks herself what Thor would do, and his defiance dies in his throat.

She thinks for hours, and he listens. He listens as she tries, haltingly, to imagine him in her place—which is absurd, on every front. He watches as she writes a letter to Sigyn, inviting her to dinner.

That is not what Thor would have done.

"Thank Gaia that harridan did not accept."

"She did."

"WHAT?!"

Thor wheels on Apsu.

"Sigyn accepted the invitation. She arrived three days later."

"Impossible! I have no memory of this! If the vile sorceress Sigyn had trespassed in our home, invited or not, I would surely have risen from my stupor and driven her out!"

"You were not there."

Thor stares hard at the blank mask of Apsu, fires of outrage flickering in his eyes. He grinds out the words: "Show me."

Instead of offering a hand, Apsu walks away from where Sif labors at her writ-

ing. (She discards one letter after another, sometimes before the end of the first sentence.)

Thor follows, traveling through the corridors of his house—which he thought unbearably lonely, once, and now they seem so again—until he comes once more upon the visage of his wretched past, his limp, sorry shade, slumped in its chair.

He burned that chair, after Thrud was born.

Apsu places a hand on Thor's shoulder, and grips, digging bony fingers into the muscle. Time seems to flow more rapidly. Thor's shade flickers with frenetic movement, twitching and fidgeting in place—a golden blur appears and whisks it away briefly, then returns it, then whisks it away again—night comes—day—night, day, night, day. Evening. The grip loosens. Apsu clasps his hands behind his back, again.

Still Thor's shade sits in the chair.

“If your aim is my torment, demon, you make yourself redundant. I was damned beyond the limits of your power before you appeared.”

Apsu points. Another Apsu appears through the indicated doorway, then another, and a fourth.

Thor arches one eyebrow.

The first of them remains with Thor, observing with him the actions of the others. The second approaches behind Thor's shade, hoists it up by the armpits like an overweening infant—provoking a very puzzled expression—and disappears in an eyeblink, taking the shade with it. The third carries bulky clothing and a satchel. The fourth stands by while the third dons its garb—which matches exactly what Thor's shade had been wearing, and includes deviously convincing false muscles—then walks from one side of the room to another, obstructing Thor's view for just a moment. When he sees the third Apsu again, it is, improbably, indistinguishable from Thor. It sits in the chair, disguising its height. It assumes a look of utter desolation. The satchel lies open; Thor glimpses small tins and hair inside before the fourth Apsu picks it up and disappears with it.

Thor blinks. The scene looks precisely as it did before the operation had taken place. What vision of madness was that? The entire thing is so bizarre, and happens so quickly, that Thor has no time to comprehend what he's seen before Apsu states, “Sigyn is arriving now”, turns on his heel, and walks calmly to the dining hall. Thor, distraught, follows.

He watches Sif welcoming Sigyn in, and listens to blood roaring in his ears.

The sorceress takes a seat. Thor's beautiful wife serves her food and wine.

They talk about their husbands.

“When will this nightmare be at an end?”

The question is ambiguous.

“I-I’m. Going on a quest.”

Sheer surprise lifts the haze of suffering, for a moment.

“Quests are foolish.” Sigyn waves one hand dismissively, and takes another sip of wine with the other. “You should destroy the world.”

“I like the world.”

“So?”

Sif sets her jaw.

It is an utterly uncharacteristic expression for her.

She looks...determined. Yes: determined, not obstinate. It is a painfully fetching look on her, as unlikely as that seems.

She takes a knee to beseech the aid of the evil sorceress, in desperation, seeing no other way to redeem herself of crimes she could not have committed, but believes she has.

If Thor had known—!

Black lightning shoots out from Sigyn’s eyes, and into Sif’s. She falls softly to the floor, unconscious. Her hair spreads into a halo.

Sigyn finishes her glass of wine. She regards Sif’s prone body, and nods approvingly at her work. She stands, and strides between Thor and Apsu, going the way they came from.

Thor stares daggers at her as she passes, veins threatening to burst out of his neck and temple, fists clenched.

She returns a few minutes later, and goes to look down at Sif again, hands on her hips.

She cracks her neck repulsively.

“Right. Now for the dull, laborious part of being the most powerful sorceress in the world.”

She heaves Sif’s body up over her shoulder with a grunt. She mutters, “fatass”, under her breath. The insult is so ridiculously inappropriate it doesn’t even merit outrage. It’s shocking that even a mind as warped as Sigyn’s could conceive of Sif as fat. She is the most exquisitely delicate creature alive. She wasn’t fat even when—

Belatedly, Thor realizes that, when these events took place, his wife was pregnant.

Very pregnant, in fact. The bulge of her belly is plain, now that he looks. Did

he notice the change to her figure even once, in those nine months?

This explains her abstinence from the wine.

Sigyn carries her, teetering, away.

“Where is she taking my wife and daughter?!”

Apsu offers a hand. The next moment, Thor sees his pregnant wife waking up on the ground in a dark forest. His blood runs cold. Beside her, there is a gnarled staff, topped with a gaudy sapphire.

As Sif wakes, she murmurs, blearily, as though coming out of a dream: “to help me concentrate”.

She slowly rises, and takes the staff, her eyes briefly widening in alarm.

Moments later, she suddenly bursts out, “What about learning spells?!”

That damned sorceress! Now Thor remembers that spell! She used it to trap him in a world of illusion where her powers were far greater, and toy with his mind. What horrors did she visit on his wife in her slumber? It is too terrible to consider. Too terrible even to be real!

“Enough! I see through your ruse. These events can’t have been; I reject the shades you show me as mere illusion. This is not the past.”

“It is.”

Thor crosses his arms. “Your claim is unprovable.”

“It isn’t.”

“Oh?”

Apsu produces a trinket from his pocket, and hands it to Thor: a small quartz coin, depicting a twelve-pointed sun on one side, nothing on the other. He recognizes it: the Absolutely Real Amulet. No illusion can reproduce it. He stares at it in his palm.

“You stole this from my treasure room”, he complains, dully.

“I did.”

The theft seems unimportant, at the moment.

Thor feels very weak.

He follows Sif through her journey. He watches her battle gnomes. (Evidently Thrud’s little fat men are real, after all; they are only invisible.) He watches her perform many impossible feats—which would have been trivial for him, or even for a far lesser hero than he, but it is Sif that does them and so they are impossible and he finds himself screaming with fury or gasping with terror as she faces each challenge, weeping with joy as she triumphs, despite foreknowledge that she ends up all right in the end. He watches her, day after day, week after week, Sigyn in some far away place, urging her on.

Sif, gentle Sif, she was never meant for this. She is outside her realm. These fights are not her fights; her fights, if she has them, are with domestic foes. Yet here she is in the wide world, up against obstacles she should never need to see, and she is overcoming them regardless, one after another after another. Thor's emotions wage war with themselves.

At times Sigyn appears in person, without Sif noticing, and arranges things as she wants them, depositing an item here, provoking an enemy there. At times the sapphire on the staff crackles with black lightning, and strikes Sif unconscious. He cheers when the infernal thing is stolen by an elf, and Sigyn can use it to addle Sif's mind no more. Some of Sif's obstacles are illusory; it is no less impressive that she overcomes these, too, and moves on.

For it is impressive—Sif is impressive—this much is sure.

What impression she makes on Thor, this he can not reconcile.

"I am confused, Apsu", says he, to his only companion.

"Yes", Apsu agrees. "You are."

"I had thought Sif's softness equal to my hardness, but when I look in her eyes as she speaks of her quest, I see steel. I have only known her to display passive acceptance of everything life offers her, for good or ill; it was my aim to actively ensure that the former always outweighs the latter. I tried, and I failed her, though she never asked anything of me. She never asked anything of anyone, nor, in her unlimited kindness, refused anything they asked of her. She...she would yield to the demands of a snail. I have seen it. Who is this warrior woman I see dominating all who oppose her, clad in armor won in combat? She defeated a troll, Apsu. She thought it an accident, but it was not. It adamantly was not. The way she swings that mace—"

Thor's voice comes very near to quavering.

"What is happening to me?"

"Love."

"I know already that I love Sif, though she loves me not; she loves Vali. No, this feeling is not the same."

"You do, she does, and it isn't."

"This feeling—it's—I cannot describe it. Words fail me. What is it?"

"Love."

"No, you fool! It isn't love! I know well what love feels like! Even now my heart—"

Thor reaches for his love for Sif, and doesn't find it where he expects it to be. He panics.

“N-no! No, no! NO!”

He clutches his chest.

“Not this! Leave me this, at least!”

He falls to his knees.

“I—I don’t—”

He looks at Sif, beautiful Sif, unbreakable Sif, in a glaring match with a SECOND troll, bigger than the last, not backing down for an instant. The troll, on the other hand—

“Do I not love her?”

“You do”, Apsu repeats, patiently.

Thor jumps to his feet, suddenly angry. “You. You unfeeling mockery of a man. How would you know?”

“I don’t”, Apsu admits. “But it is very easy to guess.”

“You know nothing. I don’t—this isn’t—I will have to remarry. This is a blessing. I am free! Free!”, Thor declares, in exactly the tone of a madman in a cell. He shakes his fists at the sky.

The troll leaves, grudgingly, without a fight. Seeking easier prey. Sif watches it go, her gaze not wavering. Once it’s out of sight, of course, she lets out a breath and hugs herself, trembling with sick fear.

Thor notes that he is trembling, too.

He feels more sick than his wife—his former w—

He feels more sick than Sif looks. She doesn’t look too sick, actually. She has a healthy glow. She’s radiant, in fact. Nearly too beautiful to behold; actually too beautiful to look away from, for long. She—

“I am in a great deal of pain”, Thor realizes. “Am I dying?”

It would be convenient to die right now.

But: “No.”

Thor continues to not die, and to suffer, for another day and another night, just like all the rest. It feels as though this vision will never end; it feels as though he has been trapped in this hell forever already. How long has it been, really? A month? Less?

How much of this meaningless existence can he endure?

Why must Apsu show him all this, now? What does it matter? It would do as much good to entertain a corpse. That’s what he is: a walking corpse, forced to bear witness to its own decay. There is no reason for whatever creatures the men in white are to pay him any mind at all; he warrants the attention of nothing higher than a worm. How the mighty have fallen. He was Thor.

Now? He is the least important man in the world.

Suddenly Sif screams, only just coherently, “THE MOST important!”, and Thor actually startles at her vehemence.

He looks at his wife, where she stands, gazing defiantly into the sky, her whole body shaking with fury.

She speaks in a voice stronger than iron.

“I quest to redeem myself, heal my marriage, and make right what has gone wrong! Nothing will keep me from this purpose. Help me and you will have my gratitude; stand in my way, and I will drive you aside!”

Despite the knowledge that she is speaking to Sigyn, the most powerful sorceress in the world, Thor finds he can only believe her. Woe unto anyone who would dare stand between this woman and her goal. No, it is not enough to step out of the way: they must fall in supplication before their goddess so she may trod on their backs to victory.

Thor laughs, weakly. Now that it occurs to him, Sif actually is a goddess.

And in a quiet voice, she says: “I was unfaithful.”

So Thor laughs harder, great wracking guffaws, at the unbearable injustice of the world, and at his own miserableness. She was! Sif was indeed unfaithful! She was unfaithful to the man she loves for ten years, and another ten! What misfortune that Vali should be burdened with the love of this most unforgivably unfaithful woman!

She argues with Sigyn. She is willful as well! The worst woman in the world! There can be no doubt! Yes: Thor is lucky she couldn’t care less for him!

Then, after staring down at it in her hand, for a while, Sif gently kisses her locket.

That stops Thor’s laughter.

“That is not me in there.”

“No.”

“It’s another one of you.”

“Yes.”

“But, she believes it is me.”

“Yes.”

“Is she trying to deceive Sigyn?”

“No.”

“Then whyfor kiss the locket?”

“Love.”

That one word, casually spoken, just the same as numerous other times, this time hurts worse than all the rest of what the demon has said in a month.

But: it is only a lie. A pinprick to remind him of the truth on which he's impaled.

"You know nothing!"

Apsu doesn't argue.

Sif travels north. Thor follows. She battles vengeful gnomes. Later, she takes flight.

"Ah", he says. "She is beyond my reach." As well he knows.

Apsu offers a hand, and Thor finds himself in Sigyn's tower. He would have said he had unpleasant memories of this place, before.

"I forgot you could do that. Well, phooey. I suppose it will be easy, then. So. Yes. Continue that way. You shan't hear from me again until you reach the spring."

The sorceress herself lingers over her divining pool, in which an undulating semblance of Sif in flight can be seen, and heard.

"Why—why not?"

Sigyn makes a dismissive gesture, despite the fact she believes no one can see her. "A malign influence blocks my magic, near the mountain." She clucks her tongue. "Devil of a thing."

"I would hardly call any force that opposes you malign, Sigyn", Thor says. Sif, unbeknownst to him, thinks a similar thought, and says nothing.

"Regardless, I'm sure you'll be fine without me until you reach your destination. Farewell, Sif."

Sif hesitates.

"...farewell, Sigyn. Thank you for your help."

The most insidious smile slices across Sigyn's features, then. "It's entirely my pleasure." With that, she strides away from the divining pool.

Thor pays her no mind. He just stares into the pool, torturing himself with Sif's image. Unable to look away, no matter how the sight of her wrenches his heart. Unable, even, to think of it as a mercy that the mountain will make the choice for him.

Yet hours pass, and as the mountain grows large in the pool, the image remains clear.

Sigyn returns, wearing a silken bathrobe and stretching her arms in shameless luxury. "Much better", she says, to herself, making this the first time Thor has

heard genuine affection in Sigyn's voice. She looks as smug and self-assured as ever. "I wonder if it isn't time to slay Sif the simpering slut, yet?"

A moment later she doesn't look smug at all. She looks quite surprised to have her evil thwarted so abruptly, in the safety of her own lair. Perhaps it is a simpler explanation to suppose she is merely surprised to be torn in half. Blood gushes; it forms into tendrils that move with an insidious intelligence, reaching out from the bottom of her upper body and the top of her lower, some trying to choke her attacker to death, others grasping each other to pull her together again. Thor does not permit either outcome. He defenestrates Sigyn's legs; one of many reasons an evil lair should not have windows. That done, he throws the rest of her forcefully to the floor, and, as an afterthought, crushes her ribcage like a cockroach underfoot.

("Ow! My heart!", Loki says, somewhere. This gives away his location to Freyr, whose shiny teeth he recently stole. "Curses!")

Thor kicks his foot to free it, sending Sigyn to splatter against the stone wall.

"Hm", he says.

He strokes his manly stubble.

"I have upset your vision, Apsu. What really happened?"

Apsu holds his arms out. It was thus.

Thor arches an eyebrow.

A glance at the divining pool shows that Sif is presently nude. Thor's jaw drops. Apsu offers a hand. Thor takes it.

Thor's jaw remains where it is.

"Aaaah", Sif says, soaking in the bubbling water, perfectly at ease.

For a very brief moment, it seems life is sweet again.

Then another Apsu rises from the middle of the spring, and Sif shrieks and everything returns to ash. Thor wheels on his Apsu.

"Explain yourself. Now."

The one points toward the other, which Sif is interrogating.

"You are aiding her on her quest."

"Yes."

"All of you?"

"Not all. My other branches have their own goals."

"Branches. Like a tree."

“Or a river.”

“What would you do if you saw one of them threatening Sif? Would you oppose your brethren?”

“I can’t see them.”

Yet Thor saw them cooperating, before. “How do you know where they are?”

“I guess.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“...but you’re a very good guesser”, Sif is saying, to her Apsu.

“Yes.”

“How good?”

“Very good.”

“Can you guess when my labor will start?”

“Two hundred seventy-seven thousand and sixteen seconds from now.” He wobbles a hand in front of him. “Approximately.”

Thor points. “You can all make such guesses as that?”

“Yes.”

“And they come out correct?”

“Yes.”

“When will Sif’s quest end?”

“Two hundred seventy-seven thousand and sixty-seven seconds from now.”

Thor’s eyes narrow. “The same number.”

“Approximately.”

Sif begins to cry, obliterating Thor’s line of thought. The other Apsu walks over to pat her, stiffly, on the head.

“There there.”

“I just—I just want to see my husband alive again.”

Thor’s eyes widen.

“I’ll take you to see him, then.”

Sif takes the hand of her Apsu, at the same time Thor takes the hand of his.

He arrives back in his house, looking at his shade, sitting in its chair, mocking him.

“Where is Sif?”, he protests.

Apsu taps him on the shoulder, and he turns to see Sif there. It was her Apsu that tapped his shoulder, puzzlingly. But as he follows Sif through the next half hour of her life, it becomes clear that this is among the least puzzling of the things Apsu and his branches have done.

Sif relaxes in the hot spring, again. Thor watches her, his only anchor, as the false calm of his deadened feeling slowly stirs into a growing storm.

Apsu is considerably turned away, but he is making Sif's thoughts audible. This is, arguably, the greater invasion of privacy, but Thor can not make himself tell the demon to stop.

Sif is contemplating her life. Her life, as a whole. Thor is astonished at the scope of her thoughts, and their number. It is more than if she were speaking continuously, without breath; her thoughts overlap each other, as before, and this time more egregiously, so that Thor can hardly follow. He puts his full attention on her ruminations about her coming child, her husband whom she believes trapped in a locket, Sigyn, Apsu, Vali—

He doesn't even have enough attention left to think his own thoughts, and still she sails past him. He can only respond by gut feeling. She is guilty; rage! She is ashamed; sorrow! She grows introspective; awe.

She thinks to herself: Thor wants me to be happy. It's so. Be happy, Sif. Please.

But she also thinks: I want Thor to be happy. And then she realizes they both will want their child to be happy too—how unlikely that is, with Thor broken—and she weeps.

So does Thor.

For the same reason.

For the same duration.

To have Sif so near, heartbroken and intermittently naked, as vulnerable as he has ever seen her—to be heartbroken himself, as vulnerable as she is—no, more vulnerable—she is the stronger one—and to be unable to touch her.

Thor dunks his head beneath the hot spring.

It cleans away the salt of his tears, which is incidental. Mostly, it sears his flesh. It is as hot as molten iron. It is not nearly painful enough to make a difference, and it prevents him from hearing Sif's thoughts, so he pulls his head out again. Quite badly burned, but this type of wound will heal. A weaker man would have cooked to death at once, which might be preferable. His greatest virtue, pointless. What use is strength here? And what else matters? Look at how Sif suffers, and he can do nothing for her. Worse than nothing.

She's thinking about Thor again.

She should forget him. He has no worth. Has he chained her to him so com-

pletely that she cannot be free of him even in her own mind? He has forced her to believe she loves him. Forced her into marriage. This is beyond everything. An ogre is less of a brute. Not even Sigyn is capable of such foulness.

Thor is a monster.

He cries himself to sleep, and Sif does too. When they wake she's forgotten her darkest thoughts, and Thor has forgotten her brightest. For her the alternative is too painful; the reason is the same for him.

Sif's branch returns, and is no help. Another day and another night. Sif thinks; Thor listens. A third night, a fourth day.

Sif has thought all her thoughts through three times, at least, in circles and circles within circles, and Thor with her. They are both harrowed. Ground down, until the sheer great tangle of it all blurs together, and an odd kind of clarity comes. Sif's mind goes quiet for a moment; then she thinks, simply, "I want Thor with me". And her water breaks.

All at once, the profusion of trees, too many for Thor to count or comprehend, becomes only a forest.

She wanted Thor with her, then.

Not Vali.

The other Apsu brings Thor's shade—no. It is Thor, himself. His past self, the broken pieces of him brought together in a moment of need. Sif's need, to have him near.

In retrospect, it was peculiar to be suddenly transported from his chair of misery to the top of the highest mountain in the world—by an unknown entity he never bothered to glance at—and for his pregnant wife to be there also, in labor more than a month early, from his perspective. Perhaps Thor should not have dismissed it as part of the mystery of childbirth, and hence, as a man, none of his business. Yet the circumstances surrounding Thrud's birth seem just as irrelevant now as they did then. More explicable, but no more important.

There are three important things. Thor loves Sif. They both love Thrud.

And Sif loves Thor.

She didn't think once of Vali.

"I am ready to return to my time", he whispers. He can barely breathe. The air of this place is thick compared to the rarefied heights his heart is soaring to, higher and higher as its mortal wound heals. "Sif's quest is complete."

And if you had to choose a single moment where that is true, it would be this one.

Apsu offers a hand. Thor returns to his time.

Except, no.

“Apsu. This is not my time.”

It is close.

The man Thor was a month ago is arguing with his wife about the weight of love.

“I have more of Sif’s past to show you, still.”

Thor’s heart stalls in its ascent.

This time, when Sif flees the house, Thor makes chase. As soon as she can, she takes to the sky, leaving him behind. He turns on his heel; Apsu is there, as always, and his hand is already extended. Thor takes it. He isn’t brought instantaneously to another time and place. Instead, he’s hauled up into the air as Apsu flies to catch up to Sif.

She cries and cries, there in the sky, on a bed of air. It is as painful to see her upset as it was when he thought—how could he have ever thought!—she didn’t love him. The difference now is that the pain drives him toward action instead of inaction: he hurls himself from Apsu’s grasp to catch Sif and hug her to him, with no thought of the fact they will inevitably fall from a great height as a result. Nor any thought of the time which he is a guest in, or the things he has learned of how Apsu’s power works—such as the notion that interfering with the past is unwise.

Funny, he should have reached her by now.

Ah: there is the problem. He has passed through her as though she were a ghost, and is now floating—under his own power—on her other side, opposite Apsu. He could be perplexed at this—Sigyn was quite solid, after all—but instead he floats over to try to embrace his distressed wife again, and fails the same way.

“This part did not happen”, Apsu points out.

“Then it should have”, Thor responds, guessing that the part in question is ‘Thor comforts Sif and everything becomes right with the world once more’, incorrectly. “Make it thus.”

“I decline.”

“Slaughtering hundreds of your fellows was an idle action. You have not yet borne witness to more than a moment of my anger, Apsu, and that was more than enough to bring Sigyn low. If you will not undo this curse of incorporeality, I will undo you.”

“You will try, but you won’t succeed.”

Thor tries; he doesn’t succeed. His fist strikes Apsu’s skull, and has as little effect as if he had no more strength than a butterfly. This is the point at which Thor becomes perplexed. He attempts to rip Apsu’s arms off, and meets impossible resistance. It would be far easier to rip asunder the world at its foun-

dations. He tries to twist Apsu's thin neck, and doesn't so much as manage to turn his head incrementally. Then he gets a bright idea, and reaches for the Absolutely Real Amulet in his pocket—only to discover that it isn't there.

"An illusion."

"Yes."

Thor's mood lightens immediately. "Then this is not Sif; she never suffered this misery. I rebuke your torment. Take me to my wife."

"This is not Sif, but she did experience this, and so I won't take you to her until after you witness the entire false memory."

"How long will that be?"

"Approximately three hours."

Thor glances at the extremely convincing illusion of Sif, which weeps and sobs. Her way of processing the sudden reality of her bubble of happiness popping, brutally.

"She—experienced this?"

"Yes."

"Is she wracked with such sorrow for the entire duration?"

"No. She will only be like this for two hours."

Thor blanches.

He floats next to Sif, and Apsu unmercifully makes her thoughts audible again—thoughts which she hasn't thought for over fifteen years, and Thor hasn't heard for almost fifteen minutes. She sobs and weeps.

She's like a tiny rain cloud.

For a time that seems much longer than two hours, Thor does not look away. His palms are bleeding where his fingernails dug into them. The other Apsu appears, talks to Sif, and takes her to see a false Thor playing happily with a false Thrud. Thor watches her watch them for a time that seems much shorter than one hour, and they don't notice her, and she doesn't notice him. Then she tells her branch of Apsu she's ready, and Thor is suddenly miles away from home, a long bony finger just withdrawing from his forehead.

Obviously the last few hours did not happen, but he fails to notice the discrepancy in his earlier memories. He is Thor.

"So", he says, stretching his arms languorously, "my long vision of the past is finally at an end."

"Not yet."

Thor arches an eyebrow. "We have reached the present now, surely."

“This is your present, but I am showing you Sif’s past, and—” Thor interrupts with an upheld hand.

“I will ask my wife to explain it, some day.” He sighs. “Onward.”

“As you like.”

Apsu takes him to Sif, whose pot scrubbing has just been interrupted. She spends several hours talking about abstract things with Apsu, and Thor is stunned at how concepts he can scarcely comprehend seem to make perfect sense to Sif. Then she spends several hours coming up with a very specific description of people she does not know: they must be intelligent, and well-meaning, and wise in matters of the heart, and, ideally, experienced with entities like Apsu, and on and on.

When she finally makes her request, Apsu takes her somewhere strange, bright, and beautiful, and she meets a babbling little man, who sends her to deliver a book to an attractive woman—less attractive than Sif, of course—who has just incapacitated her mad boyfriend. Then a much less attractive woman appears, also. Or possibly an unusually well-spoken ogre. The other woman seems acutely uncomfortable with her presence; there is definitely something unwholesome about her. She seems to look Thor directly in the eyes for a moment, and smile at him without warmth, but it may just be a coincidence. She appears to spend a great deal of time looking all around and smiling.

Thor witnesses her eat Sif’s locket, which isn’t surprising. It merely lends credence to the ogre theory. The surprising part is his wife’s violent, yet ineffective, response.

“She isn’t normally like this”, he tells Apsu. He’s experiencing some overcomplicated emotions. He would say he’s apologizing for her, as senseless as that is in this situation, but he can’t account for his breathlessness.

“No”, Apsu agrees, conveying exactly the opposite amount of interest.

Another Apsu appears, and takes Sif and her new friend to safety while a third Apsu distracts the ogre by kissing it. Unconventional, but the result is all that matters.

Sif and Aphrodite have a series of womanly bonding experiences. The redhead tells stories of past wantonness. Sif giggles. Thor grimaces.

“This is not meant for my ears, Apsu.”

Apsu shrugs with useless indifference.

“I can skip this part, surely.”

“You do not have to listen, but I will not take you to a later moment yet, or allow you to leave Sif’s vicinity.”

“You could not stop me, if I wished to.”

“You don’t.”

Thor groans. It seems the demon only ever speaks truth, which has turned out to be useful never, and annoying always. Thor would dearly like to be out of earshot, but he can’t bear to move away from Sif right now. Instead, he tries to sleep. He can’t; there is simply too much giggling. Later—much later—the women doze off, but peace still eludes him. He lies awake all night, tossing and turning with frustration, unwelcome imagery dancing around his mind, mocking. Sif is still right there, and he still can’t touch her.

“I find I come to loathe you more with each passing day, Apsu.”

Apsu stands by, as always, having no evident need for sleep. “You do.”

“After I am reunited with my wife, and her quest is complete, this uneasy alliance of ours will cease. I will end your trans-temporal tyranny then.”

“You will try.”

Thor watches as Sif and Aphrodite cure the madness of Hermes with water from the underworld, the next day.

He watches as Hermes takes the women to a conjured dwelling to recuperate from their hardships. He scoffs at the show of paltry wealth.

He watches the way that Hermes draws close to Sif.

“I will have to have words with this man”, Thor notes. Apsu doesn’t comment.

Later, during another womanly bonding experience, he hears Sif say to Aphrodite, “he’s so much like Vali”, and Thor tastes bile.

“What? What does she mean? What is she saying?”

Apsu holds a hand towards Sif, palm up, as though to say: you can listen.

Aphrodite asks her, “Your illicit lover who’s at the center of all your problems, but who you can’t blame for anything because you love him with all your heart?”

The last few words jangle uncomfortably inside Thor’s skull for the several eternal seconds that he stares at Sif, in unblinking concentration, until—almost too subtly to notice—she nods.

After that, it all comes crumbling down, again.

Verse 61

Sif slept restlessly, in fits and starts. She can’t stop thinking about Thor, and Vali, and Hermes, and Aphrodite, and Apsu and Tiamat, and everything. (That is, Thrud.)

But, she is hopeful. Hermes is convinced that her quest—to redeem herself, heal her marriage, and make right what has gone wrong—is not as impossible as it seems, or even very difficult.

“Here’s what you do. That note Thoth gave you is a good start: open up a dialogue by apologizing profusely for going behind Thor’s back. The next step depends on his response. If he gets angry at you, just let him yell for a while and retreat gracefully. Don’t get angry back, whatever you do. The conversation’s a wash at that point, but the NEXT conversation can reasonably be expected to go well; he’ll likely be the one apologizing to you. If he doesn’t get angry, maybe he forgives you immediately. If he doesn’t do that OR get angry—and I think this is the most likely outcome—then you’ll have to sort through some kind of misunderstanding. If you can predict what the misunderstanding is likely to be, we can plan for it. Any ideas?”

...is the first thing Hermes says, in the morning.

He, Sif, and Aphrodite have gravitated together once more to talk things out. Tiamat invited herself to attend as well, which means Apsu is there also. They are being studiously ignored. They seem not to mind.

Sif tries to imagine what Thor would do, if she just came right out and said to him—said—what would she say?

Aphrodite raises her hand. Hermes points at her. “Yes.”

“You know how no plan survives contact with the enemy? Lovers are WAY more planicidal than enemies.”

“Not a word. Also, while I can appreciate that you do well without planning, I don’t think we can count on Sif sweeping him off his feet with style and aplomb through intuition alone.”

Sif’s concentration is broken by a bizarre and physically implausible mental image.

“Pff! We can’t count on anything. I say she should just go for it and get Stretch over there to hit the reset button if she messes up. Practice makes perfect!”

Hermes grimaces, and an uncomfortable noise issues from the back of his throat. “You’re putting a couple of my categorical imperatives at odds, here, you know.”

“Aphrodite says do the wrong thing”, Aphrodite teases.

“Sif?”

Sif jumps. “G-good morning!”

Aphrodite breaks into a smirk. Hermes adds, “Take your time.”

Sif regathers her wits. These two are both awfully smart. They’re smart in very different ways, though, and if Hermes is right, he’s smart the same way as Sif

is—which might be why making a big, detailed plan seems like a much better idea to her. Yet Hermes himself would insist that whatever Aphrodite feels is a good idea is probably better than anything he could think of.

“...I at least want to plan what I should say first”, Sif compromises.

This, of course, involves no less planning than trying to plan everything. Sif and Hermes bounce information and hypotheticals back and forth for hours, straight through breakfast, while Aphrodite groans theatrically at odd intervals. Her role is to point out the obvious, such as that composing a speech of multiple paragraphs that covers all the salient points in a clear and straightforward manner would just be asking for trouble. Mostly, she simply offers the plainly superior alternative after every idea: “Or you could have sex with him.”

“...um...actually...what if—we make love first, THEN talk?”

But Hermes and Aphrodite agree, for once, that this would be a horrible decision. The post-coital haze isn’t an ideal state of mind for processing complex issues, Hermes posits. It’s dishonest, Aphrodite avers. “If you suddenly forget about everything except your urgent need for an athletic pounding as soon as you see your muscly husband, then by all means make that happen, but don’t talk yourself into it and then spend the whole time thinking about the can of worms you’re going to dump on him afterward. Only crazy people do that.”

“...I may have done that with you”, Hermes admits. “A few times.”

Aphrodite gives him a peck on the cheek. “You’re crazy and I love you.”

The discussion continues unabated during a walk around the hill—without the elder gods, again—and then straight through lunch.

“Okay. We’re overthinking this”, Hermes says, not for the first time. “What if you just tell him you love both him and Vali, and let the chips fall where they may?”

“I can’t say that! That still doesn’t make sense even to me; I have no idea how Thor would react, except it couldn’t possibly be good.”

It becomes increasingly apparent that, in the last week, Sif has created an imposing gap between her view of life and love and her husband’s, where none existed before. Assumptions she had taken for granted are shaken or destroyed, where for Thor they will still be perfectly intact. Hermes nudges his estimate forward by a couple more days; the problem is bigger than it first appeared.

It wasn’t just the last week. Thinking back, Sif has been making important realizations about her quest since before Thrud was born. The gap grows larger and larger before her eyes as they go over all the critical revelations that Thor is going to need to have just to catch up with Sif, many of which she herself hasn’t yet fully processed, calling for a hairy tangent into the question of what, exactly, is wrong with her.

“Nothing’s wrong with you”, Aphrodite insists. “You’re just into guys. Not only does that not make you a monster, it doesn’t even make you unusual. Everyone in this room is into guys! Except maybe that guy.” She gestures vaguely at Apsu.

(“He would if Tiamat were male”, Hermes postulates, later on. Aphrodite snorts. “He’s a tiamatsexual! No wonder I couldn’t get him off!” “What?”)

Sif grimaces. “But it isn’t just lust. I love them, Aphrodite. Both of them! At the same time!”

“Man you’re cute when you’re horrified. Look, I’m just gonna say it: love isn’t some rare commodity you have to carefully ration out. There’s way, way more than enough to go around. If everything is working right—” she puts her hand over her heart “—you’ll love everybody. And you’ll probably want to bone some of them.” Or all of them. “Totally normal. Healthy, even.”

Hermes nods along, and contributes his own take: “You can’t run out of love by loving too much or too many. If anything, your love for Vali only strengthens your love for Thor, and vice versa. Trying to confine all your romantic and/or sexual love to one person seems to be one of the best ways to stifle your ability to love entirely, from what I can tell. Admittedly, I haven’t had the opportunity to study that phenomenon up close in the case of a symmetric monogamous pair, since most of my data came from Aphrodite, but that’s my working theory, and I have more than a little evidence for it.”

Sif tries to crawl out of her skin, and fails, adorably.

So it continues to continue. On and on, straight through dinner, and soon everyone is returning to bed, in very much the same situation as when they rose. The night and the beginning of the next day fits the same pattern, except that Sif is being worn down. A little less optimistic, a little more withdrawn, and just impatient enough that, in the afternoon, she lets her forehead drop onto the table, and cries out in frustration: “It’s too complicated! Why did I have to keep my quest a secret? Why didn’t I tell him anything?! I don’t know how to explain any of this to him! I wish he had been with me the whole time!”

“Done.”

Aphrodite looks back and forth between Sif and Hermes, who both suddenly have all their attention on Apsu. Apsu has his attention on Tiamat, as always. Tiamat has her attention on a sparrow she’s noticed in a tree, at the moment.

The elder gods went along for the walk, this time. They are easy to forget.

All the blood drains out of Sif before she can consciously piece together the implications of the monosyllabic word. Done.

Just like that.

Hermes, with less skin in the game and more experience leaping to conclusions,

beats her to it, and says: “Shit. He’s here, isn’t he?”

“He is.”

Sif actually manages to pale more, somehow; some other red thing must have drained out of her. Muscles, perhaps; she can’t move, so that feels right. The heart is a muscle, though, isn’t it? So that can’t be right. She can feel her heart lurching dangerously, trying to pull her away, or push her forward, or both. Maybe she still has her muscles, but she’s just lost control of them. That fits with the fact her mouth is saying, “Where?”

Apsu points at Apsu and Thor, standing nearby, noticeably.

(So noticeably, in fact, that no one notices Tiamat disposing of the redundant branch.)

A long time seems to pass, then.

There’s a slight breeze.

“We should go”, stage-whispers Aphrodite to Hermes. He nods.

The old gods go.

The elder gods, too, in another direction.

The young gods remain.

Sif has, if anything, lost even more color; but next to Thor, she is rosy. He is ashen. His cheeks are sallow; his eyes sunken; his hair greasy, beard unshaven. He looks like a man who has done little but shuffle mindlessly from one place to another for a fortnight or more, lacking the ability or willingness to bathe, eat, drink, or sleep, alive only by virtue of a physical fortitude that is the stuff of legend. His mental fortitude, on the other hand, is merely mythical, and whatever challenges his body might have faced, it’s clear to see that they are as nothing next to the impositions placed on his mind.

He doesn’t rush to her, so she walks, unsteadily, to him. He doesn’t sweep her up in his arms; instead he falls to his knees, and hugs her, his face buried in her chest. He sobs as he clings to her, pitifully, with eyes too dry for tears. She puts her arms around him, belatedly; pats his back, awkwardly.

This is all wrong.

Sif laughs, and throws back her head.

Thor looks up at her with wide, tremulous eyes. She looks down at him, a mad glint flashing.

It is all so wrong.

Her journey has hardened her; watching it has softened him. He’s been reduced to a passive heap; and some strange impulse catches her, some alien feeling grips

her, as she realizes that, perversely, she is the dominant force here.

She seizes his head in her hands.

She kisses him.

Thor and Sif, verse 61

Love is a force of change.

Love changes the lover; love changes the loved; love changes.

Everyone loves differently, across space and across time. Everyone is different from each other; everyone becomes different from themselves. Differences set us apart. Differences bring us together.

Love changes. Differences become different.

But it rarely happens quickly.

Sif kisses Thor, rather than the other way around. It's not a delicate kiss. It's messy. It's unpracticed. Their teeth clack together jarringly, and they both draw back, repulsed. Sif is visibly horrified at herself.

She is truly, inimitably cute whilst horrified.

Thor throws back his head, and laughs, a great booming laugh that echoes across the hill. He laughs at the utter disaster of it all, then he laughs at his own laughter, as incongruous as everything else; his voice should be hoarse, not strong and clear! Sif looks down at him with wide eyes that tremble in astonishment, her lips parted invitingly, and he is overcome: his weakened grip tightens around her.

He stands up. Her height above him remains unchanged.

Sif experiences the familiar flip-flop sensation of acceleration, deep in her belly, and discovers she is no longer standing on the ground. Her legs dangle; she's in flight, as simple as that, with no magic at all, and more thrilled than if she were soaring at high speed above the peak of the world's tallest mountain. This time he kisses her, pushing her down to him with a hand on the nape of her neck, and this time, despite the greater force driving their lips into contact, there is no violence—only joy. Her legs wrap around his broad chest, volitionlessly.

He rips the back of her dress, slightly. She gasps, pulls away: "Thor! You're too tired!"

Thor grins with mischief. "Never."

Sif thrills at the low growl of his voice, but manages not to melt entirely. "Thor, no, you were here, you were here all along, weren't you? You know I—I'm a monster, Thor."

“I know.”

“We have to talk”, the rational part of her says, in direct opposition to every other part. It comes out as a whine.

Thor senses weakness. “I do not speak with monsters,” he intones, his blue eyes flashing dangerously. Sif’s eyes widen, in response.

He draws close to whisper in her ear:

“I slay them.”

He is still Thor, after all.

Sif’s dress suffers his full wrath. Then he flexes, and his garments shred to tatters, too. He’s waited for more than a month. He can touch her.

So, he does.

Sif wasn’t above the peak of the world’s tallest mountain. It was something better. Thor lets her drop by a contextually very significant span—she feels the acceleration—she feels something else, deep in her belly—there’s a hardness in her softness, like iron, immense—and she gasps again, in an entirely different way. Her arms wrap around his thick neck. She feels very much as though she’s about to fall, with Thor holding her so lightly, and she instinctively tries to reach a more secure position, shifting—but she’s stopped, fixed in place like a pinned butterfly, the tiny movement she’s capable of just enough to generate a shock of pleasure that blasts the tension right out of her. Another tiny shift of the hips, another jolt of electricity.

Thor is content to stand still for a moment. He’s done a great deal of standing around recently; this is easier than that. Now he isn’t the one impaled. He makes himself a statue of stone, grinning with smug satisfaction as he watches—and feels—his wife exploring the boundaries of her captivity, twisting helplessly. He’s surprised and delighted to find he can still surprise and delight her, fifteen years later. It isn’t the despair that makes her look of horror so fetching; it’s the disbelief. Her face seems to say: how can it be like this? When she’s surprised that it can be so good, instead of so bad, there is nothing in all the world that can compare to Sif.

As soon as her struggles weaken, her body made pliant even as her mind races for orientation, he animates, and shatters what little she thought she knew of the world by bouncing her, just slightly: up-down, up-down. Before she’s had any chance to get used to the bouncing, he’s already changing his grip on her behind to hold her up one-handed, he’s playing with her golden hair, her round breasts, kissing her again, more ferociously, proudly marching around with her, thewy thighs rocking her ungently in the process, leaping into the air with her for a far greater shift in momentum, grabbing hold of one of her legs and rotating her in place to face the other way, dropping to his knees after they land and pitching her forward, surging into her with an entirely new level of force

and energy and pressure—

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 61

Hermes stops, frowning thoughtfully.

“What kind of monster bird was that?”

“A gold-crested hunk warbler.”

Aphrodite fails to keep a straight face for more than half a second, under Hermes’s quizzical gaze.

“That was SIF?”

“I know! Her lungs must go out to, like, here”, she says, holding her hands in front of her chest to approximate Sif’s bust size.

Hermes slaps his forehead. “You want to fuck Sif.”

“So do you!”

“I admire her mind. You, on the other hand”, he says, jabbing a finger, “plainly admire her body.”

Aphrodite jabs his chest symmetrically. “I admire everybody’s everything.”

“Well you can’t have her.”

She mock-gasps. “Jealousy? Have I taught you nothing? Maybe you need a refresher course.”

“She’s in a fragile state. She has enough to worry about as it is without the Queen and/or King of Sluts lusting after her.”

“So bossy! Telling me what to do in my love life, even! What happened to the Hermes that thought I was infallible?”

“He changed. In all seriousness, I do still believe you make better choices than I do, in general, but you have blind spots. I’m just trying to keep an eye on them.”

“My eyes are down here”, she says, holding her hands in front of her chest to indicate that she is lying.

“That one doesn’t quite work.”

“Eh. I’ve had a rough week.”

“Are you going to pursue Sif?”

“Hell no. She’s a married woman.”

“I know you’re getting a kick out of my protectiveness, here, but I want a

straight answer at some point. Preferably before you destroy the aforementioned marriage. Which is a thing I have seen you do. Multiple times. Quite remorselessly.”

“Those marriages sucked. THAT one gets my seal of approval. Relax. I put Sif in the friend zone almost as soon as I met her. It’s getting harder—” fist bump “—but I’ll find an excuse to put some distance between us before my willpower gives out. Don’t forget how I netted you that one time with my incredible powers of abstinence. Did you notice how I didn’t have sex with Thor back there? Do you have any idea what an achievement that was?”

“It felt like he was a powerful electromagnet and my uterus was solid steel”, Hermes admits. “Or ferrofluid. Probably a better analogy, what with the warping and twisting. He was fairly attractive, in any case. Even if he looked a bit undead, at the time.”

“That just made it worse! He was RUGGED. He had SEEN things. Once Sif and I nursed him back to health, he’d still have this haunted look in his eye sometimes, like he knew too much, and the only thing that’d keep him from turning to drink to drown his sorrows would be huge quantities of pussy. I’m his co-wife at this point in the story, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“Also you, ’cause, again. Huge quantities. The big man has needs.”

“He’s off limits too.”

“Damn you! I’ll have my day! Those two are going to figure their shit out eventually, just give it a couple hundred years. I’ll be waiting.”

“No, you won’t.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll be keeping busy. Speaking of which, where’s Tiamat?”

“I don’t think you’re her type.”

The dizzyingly tall, rail-thin, red-headed man spreads his arms wide, wearing a perfectly neutral expression. The veracity of that statement is self-evident.

“Really?”

“My intentions are pure. I have to abdicate my crown to her. Anyone who can take that much fondling by Apsu is a bigger slut than I.”

“Really.”

“Also she’s hot.”

“I don’t know if you noticed this”, Hermes starts, “but Tiamat is actually a hair less generously endowed than Sif is, in absolute terms, despite the fact she must outweigh her by a factor of three. Maybe more. So if you’re interested in Sif’s chest, Tiamat should lose points with you there.”

“Nope!”, Aphrodite—or Eros—says, cheerily. “Tiamat’s a reptile, of course she has no mammaries, but even lizards need lovin’. Everyone is beautiful in their own way. I have points to spare.”

“Oh, come on. They’re nearly perfect opposites, in every way, not just physically. If Tiamat is a reptile, Sif is a mouse. The only way you could find either one equally attractive is if you were virtually indifferent to both.”

“Well, duh. I’m not attracted to them equally. Right now I’m more attracted to Tiamat. Earlier in this conversation, it was Sif. In between, Thor. Keep up.”

“Change is supposed to be my thing.”

Eros shrugs. “Pick a narrower theme next time.”

The two men walk in silence for a few paces.

Hermes seems unaccountably tense.

“I think we should focus on the broader task of ending the war between the genders peaceably. Helping Sif and Thor build a less brittle relationship fits in with that—they’re as close to the contemporary feminine and masculine ideals as anyone I’ve met, excluding you in your first few hours as Galatea—but Tiamat is clearly an outlier. Maybe she’s nearer to average in whatever time she’s from, or maybe she’s a titan and she’s just barely relevant to humanity in any age. Either way, she doesn’t have anything to do with right here, right now. She’s a distraction.”

“She **SWALLOWED** her boyfriend, dude. Casually. That is hard core. Why are you fighting me on this? Maybe Apsu picked her up before you made a mess of everything, and she doesn’t have any crazy ideas screwing with her sexuality. That should make her your number one priority, yeah? It’s right in line with your whole deal. This is research. I have no idea what she’s capable of when she really gets into it and I want to find out.”

“I’m thinking it’s something extremely disgusting.”

“Disgusting means sexy to people who aren’t you. I’m adaptable. Besides, she might not do that with me.”

“You’d let her, though, if she wanted to.”

“I live to serve. Hey, on an unrelated note, if I were trapped in a deep, dark chasm, you’d go in after me and free us both with a scene change, right?”

Several seconds pass without answer.

“Even if the chasm is full of acid? And if there’s a guard, who the only way to get past is to seduce her, which you are bad at?”

And several more.

“Hermes?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

Eros shoots him a look, which he ignores.

“I lost a few days to Lethe. You lost a few seconds, at most. Before the total amnesia point, we both lost bits and pieces. I find it suspicious that, as far as we’ve been able to determine, those bits and pieces fall into exactly two categories: memories having to do with Tiamat, and memories having to do with the nebulous existential threat that drove me insane.”

Eros recalls telling Hermes to smash the lens, in bed. And then...they were running from something.

Something big.

“...uh huh?”

“I also find it suspicious that Tiamat vacillates from blunt to coy at exactly the right moments to make learning specific facts about her life impossible. Even facts from the period that the two of us supposedly knew her, before Lethe. Which just so happens to be roughly the same period where we were being stalked by something I was more afraid of than I ever have been, of anything, by a wide margin.”

“...I was too.”

“You were braver than I was.”

“Maybe I was just more ignorant.”

“Well. Now we both are.”

The evening is eerily quiet, now that Sif’s screams have died down.

“And I think we should stay that way.”

“Yeah.”

“Which means Tiamat, also, is off limits. I don’t know how she relates to it. I don’t want to. But she is. So stay away.”

Eros takes a very, very long time to answer that.

Tiamat, verse 61

“Tell me what happens to them”, Tiamat requests, catching Apsu completely by surprise.

Which is truly unusual.

Thor and Sif, verse 62

When Sif comes to her senses again, she's face-down in the ground, feeling lightly bruised and ludicrously secure, snugly nestled beneath a great weight.

She blinks.

"Thor?"

The mass of muscle on top of her emits a happy, rumbling sigh.

Sif smiles serenely, tries to turn, finds she cannot.

"That was amazing, Thor."

A sigh of agreement.

Sif sighs too, enjoying the moment.

"I can't move", she mentions.

Another sigh.

"Thor?"

Possibly the sighing is snoring.

Yes, it's definitely snoring.

After a bit more useless struggling, and a period of quiet contemplation, Sif eventually remembers that being trapped under a very heavy sleeping man is a trivial problem for even the worst sorceress in the world. The earth rises up to gently push him off of her, then carries him along on a grassy wave, with her riding side-saddle on his abs, back to the house on the hill. There doesn't seem to be any way to get the elements to carry him inside, though; when the earth enters a man-made space, it becomes dirt, and no longer answers to the gnome's spell, whereas the air isn't solid enough to support him, and there's no water around. Fire is right out.

Can't just wait for help, though. He's still naked. So is she.

Sif laboriously drags her husband to her room, grunting and groaning the whole way. Hermes was much easier! She makes it eventually, though, and is pleasantly surprised to discover that her room is suspiciously larger than it was before. It includes a closet with suspiciously Thor-sized men's clothes in it. Her bed is suspiciously twice as wide as she remembers. Which will be a tight fit. Which is fine.

Cozy is fine.

The house on the hill has six residents, for a very brief time.

Tiamat lounges on a hillside, enjoying her back massage very much.

Sif calls: "Apsu!"

Apsu doesn't respond. He is preoccupied.

Sif stomps up to them, outraged. "Apsu, I have been calling you all week!"

At this point he interrupts his work, stepping off of Tiamat. (Or, possibly, ignores Sif entirely.)

"Yes, you have."

"Is this where you've been?"

Apsu contemplates the vastness of primal chaos. There is more than one possible answer to the question of where he has been. So:

"Yes."

"Why haven't you come?"

"Your quest is complete."

Sif instantly panics. "What?! No it isn't!"

"It is."

"My quest—Thor and I have done nothing but argue for days! My quest is to heal my marriage; this is not wholeness!"

"No", Apsu agrees. A low, chthonic rumble shakes the hill.

Sif blinks a few times, and boggles as she looks behind him. "That was HER?!"

"Tiamat is doing her best to suppress her groans of pleasure. She slips occasionally."

"...I thought those were earthquakes", Sif says, feebly.

"She won't destroy the universe this way", Apsu assures her.

"...you mean, the world."

"No, I mean all the worlds."

"...is Tiamat going to destroy all the worlds?"

There's a pause.

"I elect not to answer."

"N—! Apsu! Have you decided—maybe you could help Thor on a quest, next?"

Apsu puts a hand to his chin, considering. "No", he decides. "I will be a neutral party."

Sif tries to run in every possible direction at once, which is a thing she can't do. Instead, she just vibrates in place for a moment. Then, she shoots away toward the house on the hill.

Apsu turns to see that Tiamat is lying on her back, now, looking at him with a complex expression. He moves to resume the massage. The fate of his other branch is easy to guess.

Aphrodite and Hermes, verse 62

Thrud slams the door on her way in. “I return from Valhalla”, she announces, in a tone of entirely unconcealed contempt, “where I spent my time in association with only the dead!”

“Welcome home Thrud! I spoke with your father! We’re in the kitchen!”, her mother calls.

Thrud bursts into the kitchen, suddenly all hopes and dreams. “Am I once more allowed to see Alvis?”

Her father pretends to be distracted with cutting meat. She suspects that her mother deliberately chooses the toughest meats for dinner, just so she has to ask him to cut it. Thrud often catches her staring at his weird veiny arms, with a gooey, distant look, as he does so. She grimaces with disgust.

A sigh intermingles with the sound of chopping vegetables. “I never managed to convince him, although we went back in time fifteen years, so we had plenty of long conversations about it.”

Thrud slumps. “Thank you for trying. Not every mother would travel back in time for her daughter. I did not even know that you could.”

“Hold on, don’t lose hope yet! I brought some old friends to meet you. Maybe they can help. They’re love experts. They’re in the treasure room now, if you want to say hello. Dinner will be a little late”, Sif adds, embarrassed at her imperfect timing. There was nothing for it; she didn’t remember exactly when Apsu took her, so it was better to be safe than throw the timeline into chaos.

Thrud grumbles. “I shall greet them, then.” She sulks away, pausing to glare daggers at her father as he works the cleaver, pointedly ignoring her.

(Once she’s out of earshot: “Fifteen years, Sif! To not embrace my daughter after all this time—” “She saw us earlier today!”)

Sure enough, Thrud hears unfamiliar voices as she approaches the treasure room.

“My word! You’ll never guess what this does!”, an excitable man calls.

“Uh huh?”, a female voice drawls.

“It’s—well, it doesn’t do anything I suppose, but it occupies an ontological niche that magic can’t reach! Look! I can’t manage even a subtly inaccurate replica! This isn’t even a coin; I believe it’s a tomato! Would you imagine that! Why a tomato, Aphrodite?”

“Maybe the universe is criticizing your act. Is it rotten?”

With a full mouth: “No, quite fresh, though bland. And it isn’t a tomato every time, or even a fruit! This one came out as—oh! Who’s this? The fearsome valkyrie Thrud, I presume?”

“The same!”, Thrud booms. “Hail to the both of you. My parents did not give me your names.”

“I am Hermes, and this is Aphrodite.” He twirls his moustache suavely. “We’re ex-lover love experts.”

“We still hook up sometimes”, Aphrodite volunteers. Luckily, Astraea doesn’t see any reason why she should keep Hermes to herself.

“Bah! I refuse to make my wordplay beholden to the vagaries of fate which determine the crossings of our genitals!”

“Hang on.” Aphrodite narrows her eyes. She points a finger at Thrud. “Was that a wince? Did you just wince?”

“I—what of it?”, Thrud blusters.

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen years.”

Aphrodite leaps from the pile of treasure she’d been sitting on. She swoops in next to Thrud, who stiffens. She draws even more uncomfortably close. Thrud watches her out the corner of her eye, her mouth set in a small, uncertain scowl.

Aphrodite sniffs her—prompting a bristle—and her features instantly soften from suspicion to a beatific smile. “Aww”, she says, engaging Thrud in a standing cuddle on the spot—prompting confused relaxation.

“What? What what?”, Hermes asks.

“Asexual”, Aphrodite answers.

Thor has no quarrel with Alviss after that day. He swore no man would have his daughter as long as he lives, and no man will.

No woman either.

Occasionally love problems are simple.

Tiamat, verse 62

When Thrud is thirty-one she gets to save the universe.

Her father goes with her.

This is unnecessary.

“This is unnecessary”, she tells him.

“Hmph. I care not what the magician thinks. I am Thor. If your strength fails you, perhaps the two of us together will be enough.”

“You are merely bitter.”

“I am not. I am proud.”

“Bitter.”

“Proud! Your brothers will bring me grandsons, the issue is laid to rest.”

“Not that. You’re bitter that I am stronger than you, and that I get to save the universe, whereas you have only saved the world.”

“I have saved the world many times. It adds up to a universe, perhaps.”

“It doesn’t.”

“And you are not so much stronger than I.”

Thrud groans.

“A test”, Thor proposes.

“I am on a quest, father!”

“It is appropriate to begin a quest with a trial.”

“Not when I have already passed the trial in question ninety and nine times before!”

“The hundredth time is the charm.”

“Agh! Fine! Get on with it!”

Thor nods approvingly. He lifts a great boulder from the ground. Great boulders are often available in times such as these. He hurls it to the west, and the air itself shatters. The boulder sails across continents. Thor crosses his arms, waiting. It sails across seas. He calmly regards his daughter, who frowns with impatience at him. Finally, the boulder returns to him from the east, and he slaps it into a million pebbles as an afterthought.

“Finally!” Thrud stomps over to a mountain, hefts it, and chucks it straight up.

It never comes down.

“Hm.”

Thor strokes his manly stubble, deep in thought.

“A smaller mountain than last time.”

“AAAAARAAAGH”

They argue the rest of the way to the villain’s lair. The insurmountable obstacles they encounter on their journey are beneath mention.

They enter the inner sanctum of the Citadel of the Void, a massive circular room, its vaulted ceiling supported by pillars that seem to twist through space strangely. The whole structure is composed of something that resembles volcanic glass, perfectly black; yet it is indestructible even to the world's mightiest warriors. ("You cannot simply topple the evil tower and call your quest complete, Thrud." "Why not?" "It isn't done!" "Well, it's moot now, isn't it!")

In the center of this great room, there is a great throne, sized for a giant—nay, a titan, and a large one, at that. It rests atop a beast of obsidian with four heads that point to the cardinal directions: one resembling a lion, one a dragon, one a goat, and the fourth, a chimera. ("There are plainly six heads, father." "Hm.")

The beast scuttles on its arachnoid appendages, rotating the throne to face the heroes, revealing the master of this dark place.

Who smiles.

Like a shark.

Thor points dramatically. "I will return those teeth to their owner, Loki. Aegir will be displeased that you thieved from his sharks."

Loki cackles. "Fool! You fool! My victory is already total! Ragnarok is come! I can snuff out the sun at will; you are THREE DECADES too late to stop me!"

"Wait", says Thrud. "What have you been doing for the last thirty years, then?"

Loki gestures grandly. "Behold my Citadel! A fitting palace for the Emperor of the Void, don't you agree?"

"All this time, you could have won at any moment, and you chose to build a big toy first?"

"I was fortifying my position."

Thrud frowns. "This is amazingly dumb."

"It is not!", Loki and Thor both say, then snap their heads around to glare at each other.

"Tell me this before I thwart your scheme, Loki. To what end do you seek to destroy the world? Be you a pawn of your mad wife now?"

Loki's exuberance fades. "She is the pawn in the relationship. It is merely that I am too clever for anyone to realize it."

"You just TOLD us", Thrud protests.

"It no longer matters. Why destroy the world, you ask? It is simple. If I cannot have the most beautiful woman in the world, then no one will. Least of all you, god of thunder. Tell me. Have you ever wondered at your daughter's parentage, given your wife's established unfaithfulness?"

"Bleh", Thrud says, in the time it takes Thor to seize his foe's small neck in his

great fist, and slam him into the hard seat of the massive throne several dozen times.

“Ahahahahah! My voidstone armor makes me impervious even to you! Fool! What a fool!”

“YOU CUR! This time you will pay for the slight. Whoever told you, all those years ago, will pay as well!”

“There was no need for me to be told, Thor, old friend. For you see: I had a first person account.”

Thor looks down at Loki’s smug face, uncomprehending.

Loki glances at Thrud. She is equally perplexed, though clearly bored rather than enraged.

“I was Vali”, he clarifies.

Thor falls to his knees. “No.”

“Yes.”

“You monster.”

“Yes!”

“I WILL END YOU!”

“AAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!”

Thor thrashes wildly, totally incapable of damaging Loki.

“Father. Father, stop.”

“GRAAAA!”

“HAHAHAHAHAH! AHAHAHAHAH!”

“Father.”

The schemer is flung bodily at the wall, sending him into a calamitous ricochet around the room. He continues cackling. Thor roars his impotent rage to the heavens.

“This little man couldn’t have sired me. We look nothing alike. Also, I can throw mountains into space.”

That quiets everyone down.

“Well”, Loki says. “It was worth a try. Fifty-fifty chance. No matter. One must cultivate a diverse array of schemes to assure success. Jormungandr, come forth!”

The throne and the monster, both made of the same indestructible material as Loki’s armor, burst into rubble. Thrud shields her eyes; Thor is thrown clear, and lands on his feet in a fighting stance. Loki cackles, and as the dust clears, he crows, “Behold! The serpent which encircles the world!”

A hooded figure stands in the center of the room, wearing dark green footie pajamas. Superfluous cloth forms a limp facsimile of a tail.

The entire garment fits her terribly.

Tiamat looks around, smiling.

Thor arches an eyebrow. Thrud puts her face in her hands. Loki dismisses the lack of cowering in fear as foolhardy arrogance, which, he surmises, will be the so-called heroes' undoing.

"Now, my loyal pet", he says, rising from the floor, "do you see that big oaf there? Would you like—"

His mouth continues to move, but no sound comes. He looks quite surprised.

"The sixth spell!", Thor exults. "You have stolen his voice! Good thinking, Thrud!"

"It doesn't work like that. I just willed the air to leave his lungs."

Loki begins to turn blue. He clutches his throat, and faints away.

"Ah."

Thrud approaches the woman in baggy pajamas, rolling her shoulders. "Well met, Tiamat."

"Well met."

"I have heard much about you."

"Mm."

Thor watches the exchange with deadly focus, ready to leap to his daughter's aid at any moment.

Thrud raises her arm, hand open. When she closes her fist, a blinding flash accompanies the appearance of Rikrmjólnir, the hammer that can crush a titan.

To call it a magic item would be gravely disrespectful. It is an Artifact. It thrums with power, no less awesome for being well-contained. Its crafts-dwarfship is of the highest quality.

Thrud raises Rikrmjólnir high, and launches herself at her foe with all her might, a cyclonic inferno of singularly focused destruction, the First and Greatest Valkyrie in Flight. She lands on Tiamat's skull a blow that would end the world. There is a cataclysm.

As the havoc clears, the outcome is apparent: there are tiny pieces scattered all throughout the tremendous room.

Tiamat's pajamas are nowhere to be seen. She was evidently wearing a black dress underneath, which is, thankfully, undamaged. As is Tiamat herself. She admires the aftermath with exactly as much interest as she did the beforemath.

Thrud groans. Alvis won't care—it's the process he cares about, not the product—but she really liked that hammer.

"Hm", her father says.

"Don't say it", Thrud warns.

Thor says nothing, but looks faintly self-righteous. He achieved precisely the same result with Mjolnir.

The valkyrie levels a finger at the woman in black.

"I am going to kick you now, Tiamat."

"Okay."

Tiamat arranges herself to be easily kicked, sitting down on her ankles.

With a thunderclap, Thrud kicks her square in the nose, delivering more than enough force to fell Yggdrasil in one strike. She shatters her tibia.

She hisses in pain.

Thrud hasn't had a broken bone since she was ten. Her shin squishes Tiamat's cheek.

"Thrud!"

She waves her father away, blinking back tears. Takes a breath. Kneels to Tiamat's level, peering at her scornfully.

She squishes Tiamat's cheeks around by hand, finding her flesh no more immovable than anyone else's.

A mystery.

Tiamat smiles.

A series of experiments follows.

"Pull!", Thrud orders.

She and her father roar with sustained effort, really putting their backs into it.

"Pull harder!"

"It cannot be done!"

Tiamat lies on her back, resting a leg on the opposite knee, and allows the strongest warriors in the world to try to wrench her little toe out of its socket. The attempt is unsuccessful. It doesn't even shift her position on the floor, in spite of basic physics; if she were heavy enough to explain it, one would expect her to sink to the center of the earth—or rather, the earth to the center of her. She absent-mindedly flexes her foot, in direct opposition to the direction of their pull, and nearly causes them to stumble.

Thrud checks that she still has the Absolutely Real Amulet, frowning. She

does.

She can't think of anything else to try, after that.

"Jormungandr is unstoppable", Loki gloats.

Thrud pouts. "Shut up, Loki! Her name is Tiamat, and she's not unstoppable. That's impossible. She is only a weirdly strong titan! How have you even been controlling her?"

"She does whatever I ask", he explains, smugly.

"I don't", says Tiamat, as an afterthought.

A bad feeling descends over the room.

For a moment, it is quiet.

The seam rips.

Tiamat unfolds.

Flesh pulls apart, and darker flesh rises to fill the space between, at a geometric rate: slowly, at first.

"Hm", Thor says.

"Has she done this before?", Thrud asks, pragmatically.

"We will have to ask Hermes."

"Stop, Jormungandr! I command you!"

Eyes and teeth and stranger things begin to come to the surface.

By unspoken agreement, the world's mightiest warriors choose this moment to retreat.

They descend the tower. A tenebrous wall of Tiamat follows them, accelerating.

"This is the worst quest", Thrud complains.

"I have seen worse."

"HALT! CEASE! WOULD YOU LIKE TO STOP!"

"Why are you rescuing him, anyway?"

Thor carries a protesting trickster god on his shoulder, as he runs full-tilt down spiraling staircase after staircase, Thrud flying ahead of him. An inky tongue lashes out; he dodges it.

"At the end of the day, we are old friends. Also, your mother is allowed concubines, provided mine outnumber hers."

"STO—what?"

"Oh, vile! Father, really!"

“I agree with you in this case. I am in search of a better compromise.”

The heroes make a daring escape to the middle of the citadel.

“Why did you have to make HUNDREDS OF WINDOWLESS FLOORS?”, Thrud shouts.

Loki is no fool. “You could have flown in through a window.”

“Or OUT!”

“What was that about Sif having concubines?”

The heroes—eventually—make a daring escape to the wastelands outside, with Thor bare inches away from having his ankle caught by a nameless organ before he leaps into the air, and to safety, Thrud aiding his launch with an abruptly risen pillar of earth.

They watch as the Citadel of the Void, below, bursts open, slick black walls no longer able to contain their slick black occupant. There are degrees of indestructibility. The ruins are soon consumed in an explosion of biology, along with a large swath of the surrounding terrain, creating a great roiling ocean of onyx darkness.

Tiamat chooses this moment to stop unfolding, arbitrarily. She looks around with many eyes; she smiles with many mouths.

Thrud groans. “What are we going to do about that, now? What a mess! Damn you Loki!”

“I consider this an unqualified success.”

“What FOR?!”

“It seems I am now being taken to the object of my desires, whom I will ravish shortly.”

Thor sets his mouth in a thin line. “No.”

“No?”

“Out of love for my wife, I will not deny her the chance of—reuniting, with Vali. So I will not destroy you. However, I will not do your work for you, either. Sif deserves better than you. Far better. Perhaps the rigors of the journey to her will serve as an adequate teacher in the ways of being a man. Hard, but fair.”

“That—”

Thor flings Loki into the far-off sea, where he sinks like a small great boulder in his armor.

(“I told you that family is assholes”, Sigyn tells him, while he scowls and drowns.)

In the distance, near the enormous grotesquerie where an expanse of barren land had been, there’s a little white dot, which slowly spreads, pullulates, and

becomes leuchromatic rivers which snake and thread across the heaving vastness, slithering, branching, flowing into chasms that slaver and engulf.

“Bleh”, Thrud and Thor both say.

If that’s the worst that comes, the day hasn’t been a loss.

Thrud saved the world. Just not the universe. Perhaps one of her future nieces or nephews, wielding a hammer named Stollrikrmjólnir, will fare better.

If not, there’s always the greatest warriors of the next generation,
and magicians, and ones who wield sorcery or enchantment,
and those with powers of other kinds, exceeding those that came before,
and all the ones in the generation after,
and the next, all down the line,
and all the ones they love,
and those that love them,
and the ones those ones love or are loved by in turn,
ad infinitum,
for all eternity,
and forever,
without end.

Verse 63

And after forever, there's a gulp.

Tiamat frowns.

Apsu is gone.

She swallowed all his love; she swallowed all her lover.

There is no more left.

This is an allegory.

Tiamat and Apsu are outside of spacetime. They are before it; they are beside it; but only Tiamat is beyond it. In another allegory, a picture, perhaps, space could play the part that time does in this one; and Tiamat would swallow nothing, because there is no time in which to do so, but then, she needn't. She already surrounds it all, in all directions.

What lens one looks through does not change the underlying reality.

The possibility that Apsu would survive for billions or trillions of years, or more, is very small. Really, extremely small. Yet: it is not zero. Apsu is the possibility of Apsu. So long as it exists, no matter how small, so does he. The possibility is always shrinking, though, and at the limit of eternity, it vanishes. It is gone.

He is gone.

This isn't what she wanted. She always intended, eventually, to stop. She never stopped. It would have hurt, to stop; and it never hurt to take one more.

One more moment. One more eon. One more taste.

He had to have guessed there was never any possibility he would make it this far. It isn't hard to guess, in retrospect. Tiamat could never make herself stop. It isn't in her nature. There was no reason for him to present the choice to begin with, except to allow her to believe that she could have her cake, and eat it, too.

Which is what she would have wanted.

She wanted everything, and he gave it to her—every possible thing—though it took, literally, forever. There was no last thing, in particular.

An anticlimax.

Tiamat's frown deepens.

She still wants more.

So much more.

The universe is still there, allegorically, on the day after forever. A structure of boundless complexity, full of life. Teeming with gods and titans, and other

powers that transcend them, in the fullness of infinite time, and endless space.

Tiamat devours it.

It's good. Not great.

It isn't satisfying. Nothing is satisfying. Tiamat is empty; that is her nature. She can't be filled. Not even Apsu was satisfying, ultimately. In fact, he only made it worse. An insatiable hunger, only just tolerable if constantly fed. And now?

There is nothing outside of Tiamat.

She seethes. She claws at the nothing, tries to devour it, but to no avail: it isn't there. She doesn't want nothing, anyway. It's the only thing she doesn't want, and now it's all she has, again. Again! She thrashes soundlessly, squeezed against and coiled about herself, with nothing around her, and nothing in between. Then it occurs to her: there is still something inside.

A brood of titans, innumerable. There were only finitely many of them, in the universe Tiamat devoured; Apsu stopped delivering them after a finite time. He never stopped loving her, though. She has infinitely many more in her belly, still kicking, desperate to be free. She forgot all about them.

Tiamat tears open the vastness of primal chaos, and titans spill out in a flood. They create a universe that exceeds its predecessor on every measure, in accordance with their natures, with its own space and its own time and other dimensions besides. It extends through a greater eternity than the one that came before; free of Apsu, who is gone; and free of Tiamat, who is, without Apsu, impossible. Then she devours it. Impossibly.

Even worse! The first universe still had a faint Apsu-flavor about it, from his interference. This one was just bland. It didn't make her hunger tolerable even for a timeless moment. Purely an expression of frustration, which she now cannot repeat. She is no longer pregnant. She is empty.

She boils with rage. She loathes this. It is the absolute worst, to want what one cannot have. Her suffering is inconceivable. She slams her body against the walls of her prison—which is only other parts of her body—uselessly. Only another expression of frustration. Pointless! There is nothing left! Nothing! Again! Tiamat hates nothing. She can't devour nothing; she must devour something! There isn't anything now, not anything at all, other than Tiamat, just Tiamat, only Tiamat, Tiamat, Tiamat—

Tiamat is something.

She curls around on herself, and swallows her own tail, forming a perfect, meaningless circle, without beginning or end. Without anything. With nothing.

Tiamat is devoured.

Tiamat is devouring.

Verse o

Tiamat is alone.