

Washington State Penituary, Midgard

2019

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The alarms of the prison blare their skull-splitting screech for all to hear, as if anyone hasn't noticed there's a riot going on. An angry inferno of orange clashes relentlessly against the faltering ranks of navy in the yard, even as more and more of them drop to the efforts of the guards.

The death of it all calls to me, the allure of the killing stronger now that I'm this close. Human souls that the valkyrie enchantments have deemed worthy sing a boastful song that none can hear but me. I pause, bracing myself for the chaos I'm about to dive into. The moment is brief. I'm a valkyrie, and the song of blood is too powerful a lure to ignore.

I gather my feathered wings close to my torso as I dive, adrenaline pounding a furious rhythm through my chest until the unyielding pavement of the parking lot is mere meters away. I unfurl my wings, landing lightly just before the fence separating me from the carnage.

I jump the fence in one deft stride, landing at the back of the inmate's cloistered, unplanned defence as the guards reclaim the upper hand. Almost nobody pays me any mind as I push through their ranks, despite the leather and iron armor that covers me from head to toe.

This part is always the hardest, playing the reaper. The few who do spot me, by the cruel design of the Norns, bear looks of absolute terror. Some primal instinct buried within them screams that they'll soon be claimed by me.

My vision fades into blurred monochrome as I reach the middle of the riot and tap into my second sight. My soulsight highlights the human souls as a pale wintergreen, a beating orb contained deep within their hearts.

The dead souls, still caged in their chests, glow different colors altogether. Half of them are the glinting almost-blue of fresh snow. These ones will eventually find their way to Helheim and wander aimlessly for an eternity under the watchful

eye of its cruel mistress. The others are either yellow, marked for Folkvangr, Freya's hall of the dead, or glittering copper-mine.

The first body I come across belongs to a guard, his face made unrecognizable by the indent where his nose used to be. His soul tells me its story as I collect it. He was one of the first to fall in the riot, grabbed by a gang of prisoners and repeatedly bashed against the nearby wall after he put up a good struggle. Mine whispers a quiet reassurance back: he'll find respite in Valhalla. Quieted, his soul rides alongside mine in my chest, unaware that my words are merely a practiced sermon.

The next one is a prisoner, fallen with a guard's baton in hand. After that, another, his knuckles bloodied and bruised. Under my soulsight, the faces blur, one corpse indistinguishable from another save for their attire. Part of me has always wondered if the magic was designed that way, to keep us from coming to terms with the ceaseless death we choose to walk among.

Guard. Guard. Prisoner. Prisoner. Guard. The riot finally begins to quiet around me as I collect that last soul, trampled underfoot as he clawed for an escape. A slight sigh escapes my lips as I quickly sweep the yard, spotting only one more soul left for the harvest. A prisoner is slumped in a corner, his chest still rising and falling with his fading breaths.

I stalk across the battlefield, the rest of the lingering souls already fading to their afterlives. The only one left is that last, golden glow, refusing to be quashed until it joins the others singing a violent harmony in my chest. I kneel before him, letting my soulsight fade now that it's no longer necessary, and as the world colorizes, I about finish him myself.

Tucker Sullivan. I... knew he was here, I suppose, but I hadn't expected to meet him when I answered the tug of battle, much less harvest his soul. My breath snags in my throat as he coughs up blood, small pools of it gathering in the crevices of his jumpsuit.

My spear materializes in my hand instinctively, a decade's worth of bad memories resurfacing all at once. I've only aged a year since that night, but Sullivan seems to have aged twenty. He wears the same dark beard, but he no longer has hair to match it, and the lines of his face have only deepened. He's lost a lot of

weight, and when he speaks, there's a new rasp to his voice, a voice that nonetheless transports me years into the past.

"Kara?" he wheezes, his bloodshot eyes drifting up to my own. I struggle to keep my composure.

"Sullivan." I let the point of my spear drift to the soft, tender flesh between his chin and his throat. "You look like shit."

He laughs, or coughs, or maybe it's both. More blood spurts from his lips, dusting the toe of my boots. "And you," he says, "look like an angel."

I almost skewer him just for that. I probably would have, if I knew what happens to souls bound for Valhalla but slain by a valkyrie.

"Shut up!" I snarl, letting the blade dance dangerously close to his skin. A thousand potential follow-ups flash through my head, each hovering somewhere between "eat shit" and "fuck you", but none quite convey the extent of the contempt I harbor for him.

Sullivan struggles to remain coherent during the precious few seconds remaining to him, the light dimming in his eyes as he finally succumbs to his wounds. "Maybe..." he murmurs, so faint I have to lean down to hear him, "...maybe I'll see Jackson in hell."

The bastard dies a heartbeat before I thrust my spear into his chest with a guttural scream. Of all the miserable assholes in the world Valhalla could have claimed today, of course it would choose *him*!

Because the first bloody hole I carve in his chest doesn't satisfy me, I stab him again and again, crimson darkening his jumpsuit with each impact, but it doesn't matter. He's already dead, and his soul gathers with the rest without my consent. It whispers his story, and mine bellows insults back.

I pause, forcing myself to take slow, tempered breaths before I pull my spear out of his corpse and take flight. Valhalla awaits, and Prima will be furious if I loiter any longer.

The prison vanishes beneath the clouds as I soar, my tears freezing on my cheeks. The Bifrost crystal set in my spear hums as it opens a rift to Asgard, even though I'd like nothing more than to condemn him straight to Helheim.

A Midgardian Police Station

2016



“Miss Althaus?”

I forced myself to look up from my ravaged nails, bitten to the quick, to Officer Thompson, the dark shadow of his beard a testament to how long a night it had been. He wore a forced smile—the only kind you could muster at three in the morning.

“May I sit?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s your station,” I said hoarsely.

Thompson took that as permission, sitting beside me, his breath escaping him in a soft, weary grunt. “His name was Tucker Sullivan,” he said gently. “He’s been in and out of the slammer a couple of times for similar offences.”

“And you didn’t keep him there?” I spat. If they had, maybe my brother would still have been breathing.

“We don’t write the sentences,” Thompson said gently. “If you’re feeling up to it, Miss Althaus, I’d like to get your statement before we go home for the night.”

I didn’t respond right away. He took that as a turndown. “I’ll give you my business card,” he said. “You can call me when you’re ready.”

“No!” I blurted too quickly. I took a breath, forcing the roil in my stomach to settle. It was better to rip the bandage off then. “I can do it,” I said, calmer.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his eyes roving over my disheveled state. I nodded.

I waited for him to turn on his recorder. “State your name for the record.”

“Kara Paige Althaus.”

“To confirm, you are Jackson Althaus’ sister?”

“I am.”

“Miss Althaus, please describe the incident from the beginning.”

“*Incident* is an underwhelming word for murder.”

“Miss Althaus...”

“I’m sorry. It was Jackson’s birthday, so we went out for dinner with some friends. We ended up at the Purgatory until it closed. We left our friends to walk home. Our apartment was only a few blocks away, so we figured it was fine.”

My voice flattened into a dull monotone, as if I were a stranger recounting the events.

“We were near the corner of Sprauge and Stevens when the murderer—*Sullivan*—attacked us. There’d been an issue in the city’s electrical grid all day, and that area still had no power. Sullivan grabbed me in the darkness, pulled a gun on Jackson, and told him to hand over his wallet.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, choking the bile that rose in my throat back down. “Jackson refused. He tried to fight back, so Sullivan shot him. He fell, and I... *lost it*. I don’t know what happened exactly. Everything was a blur. I broke out of Sullivan’s hold and hit him again and again, until he was on the sidewalk bleeding beside Jackson’s body. I—I checked on Jackson, and his pulse was already gone.”

“I got my phone and called you. I didn’t know what else to do. Who do you call when the person who matters is already gone?”

I sniffled, tears running freely down my face for what felt like the millionth time that night.

Thompson turned off the recorder. “Thank you, Miss Althaus,” he said gently. “We managed to pull footage from a battery-operated camera, so with this and that, Sullivan won’t see the light of day again.”

“He deserves to die!” I snapped, surprising myself with my own viciousness.

Thompson sighed. “Maybe,” he said, “but that’s not our choice to make.”

When I didn't reply, he gave me a moment to compose myself before he spoke again. "Would you like a ride home?" he asked. I nodded, letting him lead me out of the station to an apartment built by two but now home to one.

Valhalla, Asgard

2019



I must have murder written across my face, because most of the valkyries assembled around the Fountain of Urd startle when I storm into the plaza. I survey each of them in turn, searching for a pair of golden-feathered wings.

Prima's already marching toward me by the time I spot her. The Midgardian lieutenant is my commanding officer, and I'd like to have words with her.

"I have Sullivan," I say, turning his soul over in my chest and wishing I could cast it into Helheim where it belongs.

"So throw him in the fountain and be done with it," Prima replies levelly.

I glare at her. "You know he doesn't deserve Valhalla."

She turns her soulsight upon me, rooting through my amassed souls until she finds the murderer's. "He died in battle, and Valhalla deemed him worthy," she says slowly, as if I'm a child she needs to dumb this down for. "Therefore—"

"Worthy?" I interrupt. "The only thing *he*'s worthy of is cleaning Hel's latrines, for god's sake! He's a *criminal!*"

Prima's jaw clenches, the closest she'll ever come to true anger. "Kara," she says, "Valhalla does not discriminate. It has one requirement, and it's not difficult to meet. I've shepherded serial killers, rapists, and so many others here, not because I wanted to, but because it's our *duty*."

That's Prima for you—she's been doing this since the very beginning. There's a trace of Aesir blood in her heritage that gives her a regal air. She's seen just about

every major war since, and has developed an unsettling calmness when it comes to the endless death we're faced with every day.

"Maybe Valhalla should discriminate," I mutter, unwilling to back down. I wonder if Prima regrets choosing me to ascend. Every time we speak, it seems to devolve into an argument.

"And yet," she says, finally losing patience, "here we are." She takes a breath. "I don't like it either, Kara. No one here does. But there's no way for anyone to separate his soul from the others you carry. Would you doom them all to Helheim just so you can get revenge on one man?"

Yes, I want to say. I've been lusting for Sullivan's blood for three years, and he's finally at my mercy. It would be so easy to damn him and all the other prisoners I carry—but the cold logic of Prima's words finally breaks through to me, accompanied by recognition of the wary looks the other Valkyries are giving me.

My fingernails dig into my palms as I march forward, brushing past Prima to the edge of the Fountain of Urd. The waters flow directly to Valhalla from the Well of Urd in Niflheim, home of the Norns, fateweavers. It is in these waters that a soul returns to a body, becoming an einherjar, a soldier of Odin made immortal until Ragnarok.

There's a trickle of blood dripping between my fingers as I stare at my own reflection. It fractures into ripples as the souls flow from me into the water. Each flows to a different part of the gilded Fountain as they coalesce back into human form.

With a flash of light, the recently deceased guards and prisoners rise, droplets glissading off their naked bodies. The Valkyries quickly cast spells, summoning simple tunics for them to wear. My own hands remain motionless as Prima begins to speak. My eyes find Sullivan, and he stares right back at me.

"Einherjar!" Prima announces, settling atop the etched center column of the Fountain with a single beat of her wings. Her voice echoes through the Plaza of Rebirth, commanding attention. The newborn einherjar's heads swivel toward her, their minds still hazy from rebirth.

Sullivan, though, keeps staring at me. I try to convey "fuck you" in a glance and turn my attention to Prima too.

"I know you're angry and confused, but all I ask is that you spare me a moment of your time. Moments ago, you died in combat, and this golden city—Valhalla—chose you to join the ranks of the einherjar. It is an afterlife of a sort, although likely not the one you expected to reach."

"Here, you may forge your own path forward. You will settle back into a normal life, separate from the one that you led in life."

Prima's gaze lingers a beat too long on mine as she says that part, her lips pursing into a hard line.

"You no longer need to worry about sickness and old age, and even death has no hold on you here. Only two things are demanded of you: first, that you will dedicate part of your second life to training for battle. Second, when the prophesied doomsday *Ragnarok* comes for Asgard, you will battle to the death for the glory of the Aesir. Tonight, we shall dine with the Allfather, Odin, in his hall, Valaskjalf, where he will field any questions you may have. In the meantime, please follow me."

Prima glides from the column, landing soundlessly before me. "Kara?" she murmurs as she passes, too low for the einherjar to hear. "Don't do anything you'll regret. We'll talk more later."

"Yes, lieutenant," I whisper back, struggling to mask the resentment in my voice.

Satisfied, she leads the einherjar out of the plaza, with Sullivan bringing up the rear. He momentarily pauses at the gate, right in front of me.

I hold his gaze. My heartbeat crescendos, pounding in my skull as he starts to run his dirty mouth. "Kara, I want you to know that I'm—"

I snarl as I summon my spear, skewering him in one deft thrust. He coughs, blood spurting from his mouth as his second corpse of the day slides down the shaft, his heart running through its final beats against my knuckles.

"Prima forgot to mention the third rule," I say in a voice that would send chills down a god's spine. "Don't ever, ever fucking talk to me, Sullivan!"

He'll reform in the Fountain in a couple of hours, but you'd think I had condemned him to the hell he deserves by the chorus of gasps from the other valkyries.

Prima merely sighs as she doubles back, as if she fully expected this outcome. “Kara,” she says, “what did I just say?!”

I smirk at her. I shouldn’t be pressing my luck, but I’m feeling petty. “Don’t do anything I’d regret?” I say. “I don’t know, lieutenant, I really didn’t regret that.”

She motions for the valkyries moving to restrain me to pause. I let my spear vanish. Sullivan’s corpse falls with a dull *thud*.

“Take a few days to get your head on straight,” she says, anger finally creeping into her stoic facade, “and when you return, there *will* be consequences if you touch him again. Understood?”

When I don’t immediately respond, Prima sighs. “I know how you’re feeling,” she says softly. “Many of us have had to put personal vendettas aside in Valhalla. We have therapists just for that, but you can’t kill the einherjar!”

“You don’t seem too torn up about it,” I retort.

“I’m not, but the Allfather will be.”

Shiiiiit.

“Well,” I mutter, “I guess I’m fucked.”

“You are *not*... fucked,” Prima says, the last word dripping with disdain. “But Kara—”

“No killing Sullivan,” I say. “Don’t worry, I’ve got it out of my system.” That’s a lie, but right now Prima’s judgement and the gathered crowd feel like a crushing weight on my shoulders. I just want her to dismiss me so I can fly away and take a moment to *breathe*.

She nods, steps back, and springs into the air, soaring back to the front of her einherjar tour group. I sigh, my own wings unfurling from my back as I take off as well, flying as far away from the Fountain as I possibly can.

The gates of Valhalla are known as the Valgrind. They used to be much closer to the Fountain at the center of the city, but as the ranks of the dead grew, so did the city. The original gates have been torn up and rebuilt countless times, the original carved wooden doors evolving into a spire at the very edge of the city. Its

zenith offers one of the finest views of all of Asgard.

If I bothered to look behind me, I'd see Valhalla in all its glory. The center containing the Fountain is known as the Village among the einherjar, a cluster of wooden longhouses that have stood since the city's conception. From there, the buildings expand outward in rings, each one comprising a new era of realm history's technology and architecture. The most recent ring is made of modern skyscrapers; human, elven, and dwarven designs towering side by side.

But it's not Valhalla I'm gazing out at. It's the city of Ithavoll, the city of the Aesir gods, just across the rolling flowering plains of Vigridr. The city lights flicker on in staccato bursts as the sun sinks behind its gilded towers, painting them in bruised twilight.

"You're very quiet tonight."

Mist's lips are quirked in an inquisitive smirk when I glance over at her. In my three years among the ranks of the valkyries, she's the only one I'd call a friend. Maybe it's because she's as much of an outsider as I sometimes feel.

She's a jotunn—a frost giant, daughter of a sorcerer who humiliated Thor long ago. From what I've heard, she takes after her father in that regard. Rumors follow in her wake, but I've only known the benign ones to be true.

She possesses shapeshifting magic, though I've only seen her use it to alter her hair and tattoos—today a pink asymmetrical bob and lush vines climbing her arms. Her jotunn heritage grants her glacial skin and an imposing stature, much taller than most humans, myself included. She's filled out a bit in her role, but it suits her somehow.

Valkyries vary by appearance depending on the realm they've been assigned to, and Mist is the only valkyrie in Niflheim. It was supposed to be a promotion, making her a lieutenant by default, but I'm suspicious it was more of a punishment. She bears wings of blue ice that catch the fading light in its golden glory.

I blink. "I'm sorry?" ask, tentative.

Mist elbows my ribs. "Spit it out. Something happened."

"Oh, you haven't heard?" I say flippantly. "I killed an einherjar. Really, I thought it'd be all over Valhalla by now!"

It's my turn to study her as her expression shifts from wide eyes to a soft, knowing smile. "What'd he do?" she asks. The question catches me off guard. Nobody else has bothered to ask me that.

"Oh, don't give me that look!" Mist laughs. "I've never seen you angry for the wrong reasons! This einherjar must have been a special breed of loser for you to lose it like that."

I hesitate. After three years of dodging it, this feels awfully close to the therapy I've been avoiding. But I like Mist. So, I tell her the whole story, from Jackson being murdered to the riot at the prison to Prima putting me on leave.

Mist is a good listener. She asks the appropriate questions at the right times, and when I'm done, she threads her fingers through mine. She almost fools me into thinking she's on my side, until she speaks.

"Prima's right, you know," she says. I know that. Of course she's right, and by extension, so is Mist. That doesn't make it feel any less like a betrayal.

"Valhalla may not be a traditional afterlife, but these people still died horribly to get here. They deserve a moment of rest before Ragnarok, don't you think?" she continues.

"The same Ragnarok that Odin somehow managed to prevent?" I retort. "I think Sullivan deserves worse than he got. Is there nobody here that you hold a grudge against? I mean, how long have you been doing this?"

"Of course there is, but Kara... I'm not worried about this Sullivan prick being here. I'm worried about whether *you'll* still be here if you don't let this go."

I snort. "And what's *here*?" I ask. "An afterlife that caters to any asshole able to pick up a weapon and swing it? You know how many horrible people those standards allow in?"

"And what gives you the right to judge? We may have the wings of angels, but we're still mortals."

I shoot her a suspicious glance, and she blushes, a pale indigo. "Well, *you're* mortal," she amends. "I'm--"

"Adorable," I deadpan, watching her flush deepen.

"Kara," she says abruptly, "promise me you won't do anything rash, okay? Just keep your head on straight when you see him."

"Why does everyone think I'm going to screw up?" I ask her, meaning it as a joke—but her lips only press together in a thinner line. "Because," she says, "you already have. That, and you're not exactly known for your level head."

I pause. She's got me there. "So I'm just supposed to let him get away with it? He kills Jackson and his punishment is three years in the slammer followed by eternal paradise?"

She purses her lips. "You're supposed to let it go. There's nothing you can do to evict him."

Mist flashes a soft smile—the kind that says *I'm here for you*, revealing dimple at the corner of her mouth. "Hey, you've got some time now to think about it," she says, "so what are you going to do for the next week?"

"I honestly don't know."

That's the unfortunate truth. I've been neglecting the print store since Jackson died. It was always *our* place, and I never quite figured out how to handle it just being *mine*. I've racked up dozens of negative reviews about my strange hours, but reaping pays better anyway. Maybe I should just sell it, but that feels like giving up the last piece of Jackson I have left, and by extension, the last mooring binding me to Midgard.

After I became a valkyrie, I didn't have time for family or friends, and as they slipped away, I found that I didn't care enough to try to win them back. The only things I really do anymore are the print store, reaping, and spending time with Mist. It's a hectic schedule that rarely leaves me any time for myself.

Mist must see the hurt that briefly flashes across my face, because she squeezes my hand. "We always talk about going to Alfheim," she says. "Maybe we should actually go."

Alfheim is one of the realms I still haven't been to. It's the home of the elves, and the Isles of Light are supposedly the best vacation spot in all the realms, at least according to Mist. She's been nagging me about taking a week of my rapidly compounding vacation time to go with her to a beach house she bought a hundred

years ago. I've always put it off with a slew of "maybe laters", because time off means time to think about all the things that keep me up at night.

But you know what? It's not like I have anything better to do. Spending time in the print shop, no matter how direly needed, feels akin to laying flowers on Jackson's grave, and maybe she's right. Maybe a vacation will be good for me.

A vacation. While Sullivan stakes his claim on Valhalla and Jackson wanders Helheim.

"Yeah," I find myself agreeing. "We should. Give me a couple of days to get things in order?"

Mist enthusiastically agrees, enveloping me in a bone-crushing jotunn hug that conjures a familiar warmth in my chest. I assure her that I'll be okay on my own in Midgard for a couple of days, and she reminds me another valkyrie will be covering my turf.

She winks as she steps off the edge of the rooftop, freefalling down the Valgrind until, just before she hits the ground, her rime-dusted wings snap out and carry her into the sky. To my credit, I manage to wait until she's a speck on the horizon before I break down; a raw, guttural scream claws its way out of my throat.

I'll kill him. If I find a way to make it stick, I'll *kill* him. First my brother, now my purpose—even in death, he finds ways to take more from me. He doesn't deserve Valhalla, and we both know it. Helheim beckons him forth, and I'll be the one to send him there.

For Jackson.

Fairmount Memorial Park, Midgard

2016



Jackson's service was *nice*, I supposed. That seemed to be the word his gathered friends and family used, but I dissented. I preferred words like *morbid* and *wrong*. It didn't feel so much a celebration of his life as a monument to his death.

The funeral home was stuffy and smelled of acrid chemicals despite the flowers strategically placed to guise the stench. The guests were his friends, coworkers, and family—a curated guest list put together by our parents. The formal proceedings they decided weren't what Jackson would have wanted. He would have rathered we crack open a few beers in his honor.

The entire day, it felt like I was holding a breath I couldn't release until his coffin was finally lowered into the ground. My mother shot me a concerned glance from across the muddled earth marking his final resting place, the tombstone engraved with his name in flowing script a crown on top.

I was the first to leave, walking stiffly to the parking lot before she could flag me down. I couldn't bear another conversation like the ones we'd been having for weeks—about talking, therapy, and time, all these things that they thought would smooth over the shattered glass in my chest. I knew they were probably right, I just... *couldn't* be done grieving yet.

I pressed my forehead against the roof of my car, fists balling at my sides. And Sullivan—the report I had given the police earned him a life sentence. A *life* sentence—something that he stole from Jackson.

The prick didn't deserve to keep breathing, and I spent my nights tossing and turning in my sheets, vehemently wishing I had finished the job when I'd had the chance. The one time I mentioned it to my father, he'd assured me that Sullivan had received *justice*.

No. Justice would have been a coffin alongside Jackson's.

I forced myself to come back to life in small steps, starting with tempered breaths and progressing to unlocking my car. I slipped inside and started the engine, muting the radio before the host could utter a word.

It only took a heartbeat for the composure I'd just regained to shatter. "FUCK!" I screamed, the heads of a nearby family whipping around to stare at me. I huffed, slumping back in the seat, wishing the leather would open up and smother me.

"It's never a good day, is it?"

I whirled on the voice to my right, hurling the first thing I could find—my sunglasses case. The woman to my right didn't flinch. She simply caught the projectile before it could collide with my window, setting it back on the dashboard.

"Someone close to you dies," the woman drawled, as if I hadn't just attacked her, "and you're not quite sure how to pick up the pieces."

I paused before throwing my purse at her. She was dressed more for the office for a funeral, like one of the many people I'd see heading to work downtown, but there was an ethereal quality about her. She wore her long raven hair in a single braid that trailed over her shoulder. Her eyes were indelible, not a common shade of gray, but rather, her irises shimmered quicksilver. Her arms, bare past her rolled-up sleeves, were covered in geometric tattoos that evoked half-remembered tales of the nine realms.

She caught the purse too when I gave in and swung it at her, and then my wrist when I followed up with a punch. "Easy," she said, in a careful, measured tone, "I just want to talk, Kara."

"And who the hell are you?" I spat, trying to wrench free even though her grip was inhumanly ironclad.

The woman studied me before letting go of my hands, her quicksilver eyes lingering not on my face, but on my chest. "Prima," she said. "I suppose I'm what you would call an angel."

I snorted. *Angel* hadn't been one of the dozens of insults I'd been screaming in my head.

The woman, *Prima*, if that really was her name, leaned back in her seat. “Why don’t we take a drive,” Prima suggested, “and I’ll tell you why I’m here.”

I hesitated. There was no malice in her voice. She spoke in a careful, practiced tone. Besides, if she wanted to kill me, she probably would have already.

The engine purred to life, and I drove out of the lot. The trees crowding the cemetery gave way to suburbs before I lost patience and spoke. “Okay, *angel*, start talking.”

Prima hummed thoughtfully, drumming her fingers against the center console. “Tell me, Kara, what do you know of our old myths?”

“*Our?*” I repeated. “I didn’t know a pseudo-kidnapper and I were remotely in the same camp.”

“Humor me,” Prima said dryly. “My *our*, I mean human myths. Midgardian, to be specific.”

I tore my attention from the road to stare at her for a moment too long. She reached over and tugged the wheel just before I drove into a parked car.

“You mean *Midgardian* like Thor and Loki?” I asked. Now it made sense—Prima was a lunatic and must have wandered into my car by mistake.

“A crude parody,” she said, “but yes. Imagine, if you will, that those myths carried a kernel of truth.”

“Then most of modern science would be disproven,” I retorted. She shrugged. “Two things can be true. I would know—after all, I’m a valkyrie—mortal and immortal made one.”

This time, I pulled over before fixing her with an incredulous stare—but the Prima I had been driving with was gone. Her clothes had been replaced by leather armor, and in the backseat, I could see the silhouettes of a spear and a shield resting among my things.

I scrambled for the door, but Prima’s hand found my shoulder, gently guiding me back. “I’m sorry about Jackson,” she said softly, and for the first time, those words seemed to carry actual weight. “I don’t know where his soul ended up, but I do know that he’s safe.”

I laughed—a choked, maniacal sound spurred by the absurdity of it all. “What do you want, Prima?” I near-sobbed.

“I want to offer you a path forward,” she said softly. “Midgard has hundreds of valkyries, of which I am the lieutenant. Our Pacific Northwest representative recently ascended to Valhalla herself, and I’d like you to replace her.”

Maybe I was the one who was crazy, because I kept playing along. “And why me?” I asked. “Let’s say I buy into your bullshit—which I don’t—why pick me for your ‘chosen one’ bullshit?”

“Because you understand death, Kara Althaus,” Prima said. “Who better than you to become a shepherd of the fallen?”

I took a breath. Held it. Let it out. Then another. I studied Prima—her armor, her weapons, her tattoos—weighing the impossibility of her story against the very real valkyrie before me.

“How do I start?” I said finally, and for the first time, she offered me a slight smile.

Spokane, Midgard

2019

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Althaus Printing was Jackson’s brainchild. I was fresh out of high school, and he had just finished his business degree in Seattle. He came home that summer with the bed of his truck loaded with printers scrounged from a junkyard, and the rest was history.

I was never good at dealing with the customers as Jackson was, so once I became a valkyrie, the store fell into neglect. I pay the rent when it’s due, but I’m rarely open. Dust has begun to gather in the corners, and a musty scent has settled over the room.

I've flipped the sign hanging on the door to announce that I'm open, but I haven't seen a customer in hours. It's my own fault, really, but I can't help but be annoyed. I occupy my time with a rag in one hand and cleaner in the other, doing my best to coax some life back into the place.

It's a bit of a shock, then, when the door creaks open, the chime jury-rigged above it announcing the newcomer with a merry *clink*. I slip my headphones off, dredging up something resembling a smile as I turn to greet them—only to freeze when the eyes that look back at me are my own.

At least, that's my body, wearing a cute cardigan that I definitely don't own. Her eyes are my own rich brown, and her long blonde curls cascade freely down her back. She has my fair skin, freckles dusting her sharp cheekbones and trailing down her arms, but the smile she bears is too broad to be mine. On another face, it would reveal a dimple at the corner of her mouth.

"I swear to god that better be you, Mist!" I hiss, darting past her to slam the door shut and flip the *open* sign.

She laughs—and yeah, that's her voice. "What?" she says innocently, claiming the chair behind the counter as I rush to close the curtains. "I needed a human guise, and I like you!"

"I don't need to explain my identical twin to my neighbors!" I snap as I turn. "What are you even doing in Midgard?"

Mist—and god, it's strange watching my own countenance adopt her mannerisms—shrugs, kicking her feet up on the counter. "It's been a decade since I was last here," she says. "I wanted to see what's changed."

"Welcome back," I deadpan. "Everything's still fucked and the world's burning down faster than ever. Now, will you *please* stop wearing my skin like a suit?"

Her lips scrunch in an adorable pout. "But I *like* your body!" she proclaims, earning the blush she was fishing for.

I lean across the counter, the corner of my mouth turning up in a smirk. "Tough." I say. "I like *your* body better."

A blush of her own blooms as she shifts back into her own form, her clothes expanding with her frame. The last thing to appear is her dimple, indenting itself by the corner of her mouth. “Happy?” she pouts.

“Much better,” I assure her, brushing the clutter on the counter aside so I can sit on it. “What are you doing here, Mist?”

“I wanted to see you,” she says earnestly. “I thought we could talk about Alfheim!” I almost believe her, except her eyes briefly flicker away from mine.

I sigh, leaning forward, hands steepled in my lap. “Cute,” I say, “but try again.”

She hesitates, and I hear the words she’s not saying. She’s worried about me. I can’t blame her; I’d be banging on her door in Asgard if she lost her shit like I had with Sullivan. But Mist’s adversity is of another kind, and we’ve never quite figured out how to bridge that gap.

“I’m fine, Mist,” I say softly. We both know it’s a lie, but it’s exactly what she wants to hear. She graces me with her radiant smile as she rises, her eyes surveying the shop.

Jackson’s touch persists here even though he’s gone. The lobby is a small room, mostly occupied by the counter and a plush armchair in the window that I used to read in when business was slow. The printing equipment takes up most of the back, the rest of the area composing Jackson’s office.

I devised the layout, but he contributed the decorations. The pride flag he bought when I came out still hangs behind the counter, and my sketches are strung up under the fairy lights lining its surface.

Mist runs her hand along them now, tracing the graphite lines on sun-yellowed paper. I drew more frequently back then, and we’d sell my designs to customers. Like everything else, becoming a valkyrie killed that passion. I no longer had the time I needed to produce anything meaningful, and my interest in quick sketches quickly dried up.

“Are these yours?” Mist asks.

“They are,” I confirm cautiously. I scour her expression for any hint of what she thinks, suddenly coveting her approval.

“They’re very good,” she snickers, as if she can tell what I’m thinking and is amused by it. I shoot her a glare. She sticks her tongue out at me, but I still bask in her praise.

“Who’s this?” Mist asks, plucking a face off its clothespin. I don’t bother fighting my smile. “Elaine,” I say, her striking features forever captured in dark pencil strokes. “She was my first partner.”

Mist hums as she continues down the line, skimming over sketch after sketch of Spokane and old friends and family. There’s a story behind each and every one, and when she finds one that interests her, she stops so I can tell it. It’s only when she reaches the last occupied clothespin that she hesitates.

“That’s Jackson,” I confirm before she can ask the inevitable. I captured him snoring in the armchair, too exhausted to bother going home for the night. He may have been older, but people often asked if we were twins. We shared the same blonde curls, slender features, and rosewood eyes.

“He’s the last one,” she notes, gesturing to the stretch of clothespins I never bothered to fill. I shrug, but it doesn’t come across as nonchalant as I hoped. “I don’t really draw anymore,” I say.

“Why not?”

I blink. The automatic response should flow freely from my lips, that I just don’t have time, but that’s not quite true. Instead, an “I don’t know” escapes my lips, and for a heartbeat, Mist’s eternal optimism seems dampened.

“Well, I’d like you to draw *me*,” Mist declares, carefully pinning Jackson’s sketch back where it belongs. I utter an unbecoming squeak in lieu of proper words as she looks at me expectantly.

“What, like right now?” I ask. She flicks my nose as she passes, taking up residence in the armchair. “Do you have anything better to do?” she teases. “Now, how would you like me to pose?”

I grumble, of course, but she waits patiently as I delve into the office for an old sketchbook and my drawing pencils, then as I pose her in the sliver of sunlight that seeps in above the curtains. In the end, she lounges idly in the chair at a more human stature, legs draped over an armrest, her boots swaying in the air. She

presents me with an adorable smirk, and I know *that's* the expression I want to capture.

I didn't realize I missed drawing until this very moment. The tip of my pencil grazes the paper, tracing her, and I'm fully engrossed in capturing her optimism.

Mist is a good model, staying almost perfectly still. What undoes her is the boredom of it. I fall silent, engrossed in sketching the vital initial lines of her frame, and she soon clears her throat.

"What does a print store even do?" she asks with dead sincerity. I pause mid-line, pencil tip halting over the collar of her jacket. "You're serious?"

Her lovely blush returns as she playfully hurls a pen at me. "Hey, you know I'm hardly ever here!"

I catch it between my thumb and my forefinger and set it down on the counter, musing on how best to answer her question.

"I have expensive printing equipment," I explain, "so if a customer has an idea for, say, business cards, bookmarks, t-shirts, or anything else, it ends up being cheaper for them to hire me to make it for them than to get the printers themselves."

"Well, that's miserable," Mist says. "I could do that for free in seconds."

"Is that a threat, jotunn? Are you planning on putting me out of a job?"

Mist just laughs. We flip each other off in unison and devolve into laughter until I order her back into position.

Unfortunately, Mist is right, but Midgard doesn't have any magic of its own. Prima explained it to me once, from her firsthand experience. Centuries ago, the most powerful lords in the realm decided to usurp Odin from his throne, and they came close to succeeding. As punishment, Midgard was veiled from the other realms and its inherent magic suppressed. After generations, the nine realms have been dismissed as myth, and the only visitors to Midgard now permitted are the valkyries. We call the separation the Midgardian Rift.

Technically, even Mist isn't supposed to be here as a jotunn, but there's no way for her to be discovered if I don't give her away. Our Bifrost crystals let us venture anywhere we'd like in the realms.

“Althaus,” she muses, “is this a family business?”

I nod, switching to darker pencils now that the bare bones of the drawing are done. “Sort of. It was Jackson’s idea. He found the equipment and gave me a job.”

She waits—for what, I’m not sure. “You’re smiling,” she says eventually.

I spare her a long glance. “Am I not supposed to be?”

Mist winces. “When you talk about Jackson... usually, it’s not the happy memories.”

“It’s Sullivan,” I finish for her, the tip of the pencil shattering against the paper.

Mist has a habit of rambling when she’s nervous. Usually, I find it endearing, but for the first time, it becomes intolerable. “Yeah. You’re so focused on how you’re going to get revenge on him, but there’s no revenge to be had anymore! If you wanted to kill him, you should have done it while he was alive, because now, you’d need Laevateinn to send him to Helheim!”

She inhales sharply, realizing what she just said. I set my pencil down. “Loki’s mistletoe dart?” I ask.

“No!” Mist blurts, too quickly to be truthful. “It’s... a fairy tale among the valkyries from before my time—a dwarven weapon of the same magnitude as Mjolnir, except nobody has been able to prove it exists.”

She’s cute when she’s flustered, but she’s just told me everything I need to know. The only thing I’ve ever heard regarding Laevateinn is the story of a prophecy that never came to pass.

Eight hundred years ago, the god of light, Baldur, suffered tormenting visions of his own death. Distressed, his father, Odin, ventured into Helheim and was told how Baldur would meet his doom. Baldur’s mother, Frigg, was unwilling to let her son’s death come to pass. She journeyed throughout all the realms and extracted a promise from every entity on Yggdrasil’s branches to never harm her son, save for one tiny, harmless Midgardian plant: mistletoe.

In Asgard, the Aesir made a game out of Baldur’s newfound invulnerability. They threw every weapon they could lay hands on at him, and each one bounced off harmlessly.

Jealous, scheming Loki watched the festivities with contempt and hatched a plan to end Baldur. He fashioned a dart of mistletoe and gave it to the blind god of darkness, Hodr. Guided by his hand, the dart pierced Baldur through the chest, and the god of light dropped dead.

Prima had told me that Baldur's death and Loki's subsequent eternal imprisonment were supposed to mark the beginning of Fimbulwinter, the three-year apocalypse that heralded Ragnarok, but here we are centuries later with Ragnarok nowhere in sight. Odin theorizes that a different, unknown factor will start Fimbulwinter, but even the Norns haven't been able to glean what it is.

Laevateinn, though, is a name I've only heard once. It's what Prima called Loki's dart, a slip of the tongue, perhaps, but with Mist's own blunder, I suspect that there's more to it than that. The Aesir love their artifacts—Thor with his hammer, or Odin with his spear—but I can't remember anything wielded by Loki save Laevateinn.

I regard Mist carefully, noting the strain in her smile and the white skin stretched over her knuckles. My own pulse pounds against my ribs, intensified by the thought of putting Sullivan where he belongs.

"You're probably right," I say as levelly as I can manage, careful not to betray just how thrilled I am. "There's no point in pursuing a fool's errand."

Mist lets out a breath and quickly changes the subject to Alfheim, content to do the rest of the talking as I finish the drawing.

The sun hangs low in the sky, casting the store in shades of bronze by the time I'm done. I stand, stretching the cramped muscles in my back and neck, and present her with her own likeness.

Mist takes it, wordlessly inspecting it. Her expression betrays nothing, and I find myself anxious as I wait, as if I'd crumble into dust if she has one negative thing to say.

"I'm out of practice," I say, "and I probably could have done better with better lighting, and—"

She grins as she reverently sets the drawing down, enveloping me in a soft hug. I tense, suddenly unable to breathe with my cheek flush against her chest as

she leans down and murmurs, “It’s perfect. Do you want this for your wall, or can I keep it?”

“Oh!” I squeak, taken off guard. She laughs as I clear my throat. “It’s all yours,” I breathe, not trusting myself to say anything else right now. There’s a hollow ache building in my chest, a poison inflicted entirely by myself. Her affection would hurt a hell of a lot less if I wasn’t planning on betraying her trust the moment she leaves.