

PART 2

Ithavoll, Asgard

2019



The name “Asgard” used to exclusively refer to the city of the Aesir. The realm beyond its ancient walls was largely uncharted until Odin opened it to the other realms in the Midgardian 1500s. The Aesir city became known as Ithavoll, after Odin’s palace sprawling at its center, and Valhalla branched off to become its own entity.

Ithavoll also houses the Bifrost. Midgardian legend depicts it as a rainbow bridge tethering Asgard and Midgard, but that’s not quite accurate. Instead, it’s a kaleidoscopic crystal formed from Yggdrasil’s sap that allows travel from its base to anywhere a substantial splinter of it can be found in the realms. My own spear contains a sliver of it in its shaft to tap into its magic.

The watcher god Heimdall has spent years perfecting it, creating a network of transport across the realms. Ithavoll has become a melting pot of culture as a result, where Aesir, humans, elves, dwarves, and even jotunn live side by side.

I descend upon Volga Market, landing in an alley so that I don't draw unwanted attention. Humans are more common than jotunn in Ithavoll, but we're still uncommon thanks to the Rift. I draw my hood over my head as I emerge, my wings retracting into my spine. With my fair skin, I could pass as an elf, but anyone with soulsight will be able to properly identify me.

Deducing where Loki was imprisoned after killing Baldur was surprisingly easy. I suppose the Aesir had banked on no one being sane enough to look for him. What that makes me, I'm not quite sure.

All it took was a quick stop in Valhalla to visit Olrun, keeper of the Valhalla Library. She was more than happy to discuss Loki's imprisonment with me. It probably helped that she had no idea who I was or what I planned to do.

The difficult part will be finding where in Ithavoll Loki actually is. He's in a cave somewhere, alongside his wife, Sigyn, but that's all I know. I tap into my soulsight as I venture out of the alley, eyes cast downward in search of their souls.

Despite the late hour, Volga is still humming with activity. What's changed are the wares and clientele. The outdoor stalls are abandoned, their wares locked up for the evening, but the bars and clubs in the buildings beyond have turned their lights on, their music pulsing from within. Souls congregate within, a throng of color that hurts my eyes to look at.

I wander out of Volga and onto the streets, hands shoved in my pockets as I make my way toward Odin's palace. It makes sense that he'd want Loki close to him. After all, his escape is one of the events that heralds Ragnarok, but even as a valkyrie, I'll have a hard time getting through palace security without a fight.

I'm almost to the towering gates when I see it. There's a soul glowing dimly, deep below my feet, a blend of Aesir gold and jotunn purple. I pause, searching for the other soul that should accompany it—Sigyn's—but see no other lights. Even the snake that should be torturing him is absent.

I rack my brain, trying to think of other Aesir-jotunn that the soul could belong to, but the rest of the gods that fit the description are walking free elsewhere in Asgard. It has to be Loki—but where are his associates?

He's too close to me for his cave to be connected to Odin's palace. Luckily, Mist taught me how to see through glamours ages ago. The most important part is simply to actually be looking for them.

I focus and notice an unmarked door that shimmers under my scrutiny. I open it, and step into a dark corridor. The walls are smoothly carved and the floor slopes downward.

I draw my spear, channeling the Bifrost crystal's Alfheim magic to cast the corridor in a soft glow as I descend. The corridor slants in spirals, the slick plaster eventually giving way

to rough-hewn stone. As Ithavoll vanishes above me, I feel more and more like I'm starring in a horror movie. The only sound is my footsteps and my own breath, and a chill begins to creep under my armor.

Still, the tunnel spirals. I walk for fifteen minutes, then thirty. The only thing keeping me from retreating to the surface is the Aesir-jotunn soul drawing steadily closer.

I breathe a sigh of relief as the tunnel abruptly expands into a proper chamber, lit by torches glowing with crimson Muspelheim flames that will never go out. A single, shoddy door stands before me, made of rotting wood and without a hinge or knob to be seen. The only defining detail is a name etched in runes, inscribed millennia ago.

“*Loki*,” I read, my fingertips brushing against them. The door vanishes as if it were never there, and I’m free to step into the prison.

Loki’s punishment for killing Baldur had always struck me as excessive. Sigyn and Loki’s sons, Narfi and Vali, were taken alongside their parents to this very cave, where Odin transformed Vali into a savage wolf that tore Narfi to shreds. Narfi’s intestines were enchanted by dwarves to be nigh unbreakable and then used to bind Loki here forever.

A snake was positioned above Loki’s eyes, dripping venom onto his face. It was then that the Aesir left, content with his torment, save for Sigyn. The myth says that she stayed

by his side to catch the venom in a bowl, but when I walk in, I see neither goddess nor snake.

There's only the owner of the Aesir-jotunn soul: Loki himself. I'm never sure what to expect when I meet a new god, but in my mind, I always pictured he would resemble his adopted family, with a trace of Mist's jotunn features splashed in.

The god before me doesn't have Thor's physique or Odin's scrutinous eyes, nor even Mist's glacial skin. If I couldn't see his soul, I'd doubt that he was even a god. He looks like he should be sleeping on benches and eating out of trash cans in Midgard.

His silver hair is greasy and unkempt, the strands closest to his face burned to the color of ash. He has a narrow, wily face that might have been handsome when he was young, but now, lines are etched deep into the sunken hollows of his cheeks. Scars on his lips hint at the work of a needle and thread.

The rest of his body is terribly thin, to the point that I can count each of his ribs, and he's wearing only a loincloth that doesn't look like it's been changed in centuries.

The bindings are so filthy they could pass as ropes if I didn't know the truth, their original coloring faded to a pale sepia. They dig into his wrists and ankles, holding him splayed over the stone slab he lies upon. Above him, one of the

stalactites has the faint indentation of a serpent's coil pressed into it, and an abandoned wooden bowl sits at the base of the slab.

"Loki?" I venture when he doesn't stir at my entrance. I wait for an uncomfortable moment, then another. Can gods die from neglect? When was the last time another living being came down here? I don't want to be the one to break the news to Odin, if that's the case.

But his chest rises and falls with raspy breaths, so I wait, finding an outcropping in the walls that can serve as a seat. Is this truly the punishment Odin inflicted on him for killing Baldur? It seems... cruel, to say the least.

I quickly do the math. He's been down here for eight hundred years, at least, and although the snake seems to have left, so has Sigyn.

Loki has been thoroughly broken, and still, he'll find no respite until Ragnarok. Maybe a similar fate awaits me if I'm caught killing Sullivan, and yet, I can't bring myself to care.

"You're not Thor," a raspy voice wheezes.

I glance up, startled, to see Loki staring right at me. His eyes, now open, are the same cerulean hue as Mist's, the whites clouded and the skin around them burnt. He squints, as if he's having a hard time seeing me, so I cross the cave to sit before him.

“I’m not,” I say softly. “I’m Kara.”

The cerulean briefly dips into soulsight quicksilver as he peers into my soul. I don’t know what he finds there, but it clearly amuses him. His lips part in a minuscule smirk as his eyes return to normal.

“A Midgardian valkyrie,” he muses. “I’m sorry, is it appropriate to say that? You’ll have to excuse me. I’ve only had the same two visitors in the past few hundred years.”

“Thor and Sigyn?” I venture.

Loki sighs. “Thor and Father. Tell me, what do they teach you about me in this century?”

“That you’re the god of deception,” I say. “That you’re a killer and a liar, and that you’re supposed to be here with a snake and your wife.”

He emits a weary rasp that’s only recognizable as a laugh by the smile that curves his lips. “Two of those things are true,” he says. “Blood stains my hands, and my companions in torment should be here suffering alongside me—but I am not a god of lies, as my family likes to paint me. I am the god of words.”

I huff. This isn’t why I’m here. “Look, Loki, I’m sorry for your loss, but I really need to know about Laevateinn. And for your sake, don’t lie to me—I’m sure I can find something to replace your snake.”

It's a bold claim, one that Loki doesn't even seem to react to. "I wouldn't dream of it, Kara!" he exclaims, as if the very thought is appalling. "But, you see, Odin would be *extremely* upset if I just *told* you everything there is to know about a godkiller."

I blink. A godkiller? That's a more potent weapon than I thought I was hunting.

"Don't fuck with me, god," I say coldly. "Odin sent me to fetch it, and you're going to tell me where it is." It's a lie, but hopefully one that inspires cooperation from him.

He regards me with the same level of frost. "Odin," he says, "is the one who hid it in the first place."

I snarl as I stand, my spear flashing into my hands, but Loki merely extends a finger. "Sit," he says. "Take a moment to converse with me. You must understand, conversation with my family does get rather dull after a few hundred years. Perhaps I'll tell you what you wish to know once we're through."

I take a placating breath as I sit back down, my spear clutched in my lap. He may have the carrot, but I *am* the stick. I can always beat it out of him if he isn't forthcoming. "Okay, Loki," I say, "what would you like to talk about?"

"Tell me about Midgard," he says, the excitement in his voice poorly veiled. "Thor doesn't seem to realize there's a world outside of the taverns of Norway."

I consider for a moment before answering. “I’m from the States—specifically Washington—and I haven’t really been out of the region.”

“It sounds better than Norway already.”

I chuckle despite myself. “I’m not sure about that, but it’s always been home. There are forests, mountains, rivers—”

“Never mind, it sounds *remarkably* like Norway,” Loki says.

I shrug. “It’s slightly warmer.”

“A redeeming quality. And your people?”

I hesitate. “My people?”

“Your friends, your family,” he elaborates. “Don’t tell me you have none.”

“I suppose there’s Mist,” I say. “She’s the only jotunn valkyrie, which never seems right. She’s my friend.” That word has never felt right, but it’s the only one I can ever come up with to describe us.

“Would this be the same Mist that defeated Thor?” he asks. “I remember he was quite affronted when next he came to visit.”

“The very same,” I confirm. “There’s also Prima. She’s... stiff, but we’ve had drinks a couple of times. She can be pleasant, just not while she’s on duty.”

“If this is the same Prima from my time, she’s always on duty.”

“You knew her?”

“In a way. She’s the grandchild of one of Heimdall’s sons, a noble. In her youth, she was quite the duelist. I remember she became rather smitten with an Aesir.”

I lean forward, intrigued. “Which one?” I ask, perhaps too eagerly. His answer isn’t nearly what I expected.

“Me.”

I don’t know why I expected to see through the deceptions of a god of lies. I pause, scouring his face for any tell, but there’s none to be found. “I’ve never heard of this,” I say with no choice but to assume he’s telling the truth.

He shrugs, or mimics the gesture under his bindings. “You wouldn’t have. It was kept rather hush-hush among the Aesir, and Prima herself is not very fond of the tale.”

“And how do I know you’re not lying?”

“You don’t.”

That might just be the first honest thing he’s said to me. I wait, expecting him to elaborate, but wind up having to prompt him.

“Well?” I say impatiently. “What happened?”

“I’m not too fond of the tale myself, to be frank,” Loki says. Is that a note of regret in his voice? It can’t be. I could make myself sound pathetic for sympathy points too.

“I got into some trouble with a jotunn, Thjazi, his name was, and the only way he would let me go was if I swore to bring him Idunn and her apples of immortality. I did, of course, and for a time, all was well. Nobody noticed that Idunn had vanished from her orchard, vast as it was, and life in Asgard went on as usual.”

“So you sacrificed a woman for your freedom,” I say. “That sounds rather typical to me, snake.”

A spark of *something* flashes through Loki’s eyes. “I was a selfish creature,” he says with forced calm. “Perhaps I still am.”

“Without Idunn’s apples, the gods began to grow old. Thor forced me to reveal my deception, and Father tasked me with retrieving Idunn from Jotunheim. Prima, young and foolish as she was, begged to be permitted to go with me.”

“And they fucking *let her?*”

“*I let her.*”

My hands clench into fists. “You’re a monster.”

“I know.”

He takes a breath. “I used her to distract Thjazi while I freed Idunn. I suppose I knew there was a chance she would die, but... I was still surprised to find her corpse. Something

came over me, and as I fled back to Asgard I carried Idunn over one shoulder and her corpse over the other.”

“God of words indeed,” I say. “Clearly, she’s alive.”

“Only because Idunn bargained with Hel to return Idunn’s soul to the land of the living. The trouble is, I’m not sure all of her came back. Her soul had briefly wandered in Helheim, and much of the fire within it remained there, including the affection she had harbored for me. When it came time to punish me, it was she who provided the serpent.”

“No shit,” I say.

I never knew about any of this. Why would I? I rarely broach the subject of Jackson with anyone, and this must hurt just as much.

Loki sighs with what seems to be genuine remorse. “It’s quite a sad tale,” he says. “Give her my condolences when you see her next.”

My silence seems to be a paragraph he can read. His mouth parts in a little o. “You’re not supposed to be here, are you, Kara?” he says. “There’s someone you want to kill, but you’re having trouble getting past that pesky immortality. An Aesir? A Vanir?”

“That,” I say stiffly, “is not up for discussion.”

“Ah,” Loki says, ignoring me. “An einherjar.”

“Quiet, god!”

“I’m merely curious what would drive a valkyrie to the brink of treason,” the liar god says. “I am always curious about stories, Kara. Perhaps yours mirrors Prima’s, a noble crusade in the name of love. Or more likely, it’s closer to mine.”

I tense, torn between coercion and subtlety. Loki sighs as he rests his head on the rock, staring dreamily off into space. “I won’t deny that I killed Baldur,” he says, “or that I was a thorn in the Aesir’s side for countless years.”

He trails off. “That’s it?” I ask. “Where’s your defense, deceiver?”

“I have none,” Loki says, and there’s finally a hint of *something* in his voice besides unnatural stillness. “I am not a god of lies, Kara, no matter what the Aesir might have you believe. I am a god of words, a god of stories, and the line between a fable and a falsehood is often blurred.”

“I had another wife before Sigyn, a jotunn, Angrboda. We met and married in secret, for back then, the divide between Aesir and jotunn was far harsher than it is today. I was a fool. There was no hiding from Odin, whose eye sees all from his throne. He ordered our children imprisoned and Angrboda slaughtered before me.”

He’s crying. His tears are black from the venom scars, but I want to believe him nonetheless. I tentatively brush one away with my thumb, and he nods gratefully.

“Thank you. I suppose it was then that I began to hate the Aesir. I secretly wished them all dead, so when Baldur was presented as unkillable, I saw it as a challenge, a chance to take my retribution in blood. Mine was the hand that killed him, and I have been suffering ever since. Sigyn left a year into my punishment, unable to bear witness any longer, and the snake slithered away not long after. The roar of my thoughts turned out to be punishment enough.”

“Let my torment be a lesson to you. Take caution if you still wish to pursue Laevateinn, valkyrie. Is the death of the one that you seek worth the price it will extract from you?”

“It is,” I say without hesitation. “It has to be. Because—”

My voice cracks. “—I don’t know what else will fill this *hole* that he left.”

“So it’s not justice you seek,” he says.

“No. I just want to murder the prick.”

Loki’s lips press together in a harsh, thin line. “Then I’ll tell you what I know of Laevateinn. It was far, far more than the dart of mistletoe Odin would have you imagine. I worked with a dwarf by the name of Litr to fashion it. It’s not of the same quality as Mjolnir or Gungnir or any of the weapons the other Aesir insist on flaunting, but it has a silent power of its own.”

“Dwarven craftsmanship, you see, is paradoxical in nature. It focuses on concepts rather than smoke and steel, and

impossibilities are the greatest concepts of all that a weapon can be imbued with. Litr and I spent weeks tracking down the more common ones—glowing darkness, a flying fish, and so forth. But killing Baldur with it gave it one more, the rarest impossibility of them all.”

“Odin fears Laevateinn because it was finished with the death of an immortal. It was for this transgression that Litr was killed, and Laevateinn was hidden, for its power is enough to slay any god, not just Baldur... or send an immortal einherjar to Helheim.”

My heart plummets. “You don’t know where it is, do you?”

Maybe it’s for the best if he doesn’t. Mist and I will go to Alfheim tomorrow, and I’ll just have to live with the knowledge that Sullivan gets to live after what he’s done.

“On the contrary,” Loki says, and somehow that’s worse. “It’s in the waters of Hvergelmir.”

The source of all the waters in the realms, nestled in the roots of Yggdrasil in Niflheim. I rise too eagerly before tempering myself, forcing myself to take a breath. “Thank you, Loki,” I say softly. “I’ll try to visit.”

I mean it, too, but Loki just wheezes that tired, old laugh. “No,” he says as I leave, “you won’t.”

Niflheim

2019

ᛖ | ᚠ | ᚢ | ᚦ | ᚩ | ᛘ

Without my Bifrost crystal, I would have contracted hypothermia within minutes of arriving in Niflheim. It's still not pleasant as it is. My wings feel stiff as I fly, and the cold tears into any exposed flesh it can reach.

Niflheim is one of the two primordial realms, a world of unrelenting ice and wind. Its twin, Muspelheim, is its opposite, a world of fire and ash. Between them, Yggdrasil sprouts, and the other seven realms flourish.

From Asgard, I seem to have arrived in the ruins of an ancient village. Stone columns tower above me, far too tall to have been made for humans. I vaguely remember Mist talking about her ancestors hailing from the primordial realms. Maybe this was a jotunn settlement, before most sentient life vacated the realm.

I huddle under a shelf of ice to figure out my next move. Three wells pool in the roots of Yggdrasil here, Hvergelmir being one of them. The Well of Urd supplies the resurrecting waters we use in Valhalla, and the Well of Wisdom houses the severed head of Mimir.

It seems simple enough—if I find Yggdrasil, I find Hvergelmir. If I find Hvergelmir, I find Laevateinn. And if I find

Laevateinn, then Sullivan will be able to count the breaths remaining to him.

I grit my teeth as I attempt to take flight, but the winds are too harsh. I settle back to the ground. If I die here, no one will ever find me. I suppose I'll have to walk.

I need high ground. I didn't spot Yggdrasil in the storm flying in, and I certainly can't see it with this towering ruin in the way. There's a spire in its center that might work, craggy enough that I should be able to climb it.

I curse myself for not stopping at my apartment to grab a coat as I begin the ascent. It's rough going. Some of the ledges barely have enough purchase for my fingertips, and even my enhanced muscles start to scream halfway up—and that's before accounting for the frost that coats every surface. There's a couple of moments where the stone breaks off beneath my foot and I think I'm going to join Jackson, but I make it to the summit intact.

There—Yggdrasil's roots span the horizon, the trunk itself stretching into the sky. The tree manifests itself differently in each of the realms. Here, at the lowest of the nine, it's a gnarled mess.

The descent from the pillar is much easier than the climb. I gently glide to the bottom, landing in a snowdrift. I shake off the frost and plod on toward Yggdrasil.

Thirty minutes of cold, brutal silence follow, leaving me alone with nothing but ghosts for company, or maybe just the howling wind. It makes me long for the beaches of Alfheim, or at least for centralized heating, but I'm so close now. Every breath I take, Sullivan mirrors in Valhalla, but every step brings me closer to ending this profane symmetry.

Finally, the roots tower over me, and I wade knee-deep into still waters that have somehow remained free of ice floes. This must be Hvergelmir. The Well of Urd is guised from mortal sight, and I don't see a severed head anywhere nearby. The waters feed the roots, spreading from the bank on which I stand to the distant horizon.

I shiver, huddling closer to my spear. I didn't think this part through. Laevateinn could be anywhere here.

I tap into my soulsight as I wade forward, the water sloshing over the collar of my boots and infusing my socks with a punishing chill. Sometimes, a soul imprints on an object close to it, leaving a trace that I'll be able to see through the well's lightless surface. Only one glow cuts through the grayscale landscape—a furious orange I've never seen before. It's not Loki's Aesir-jotunn soul, but something else, something *huge*, and it's rushing toward me far too fast.

My wings flare out, catching the storm wings and hurling me back just before a set of massive jaws snap shut where I

was standing. I struggle to steady myself as the dragon roars—a territorial predator protecting its claim.

I can't bring my already strained breaths under control as I level my spear at it. Somehow, I'd forgotten about Nidhogg, the dragon that lives in Yggdrasil's roots, gnawing at its foundation until Ragnarok. It's a hulking beast, its mauve scales layered like plate armor, dense musculature rippling underneath as it stomps toward me. Steam jets from its broad nostrils, and sparks crackle between its uneven teeth. It has no wings to speak of, but it doesn't need them. Each stride is already quick enough.

I swallow. On the rare occasions Mist has souls to shepherd, it's always because of Nidhogg. Mortals are prone to pursuing suicidal ventures, and chasing after dragons is a favorite pastime. All I know is that every one of them are dead, and Nidhogg doesn't have a scratch on it. I'm probably fucked, but at least Mist will take me to Valhalla if I die here.

“Hey!” I shout, first in English, then in Aesir, and even my broken Jotunn for good measure. “I’m not here to fight! I just want Laevateinn, and I’ll be out of here!”

Nidhogg hesitates for a moment, but otherwise shows no signs of comprehension. It opens its jaws, firing a lightning bolt that burns along my spine as I duck. I sigh, my shield appearing on my other arm. “Have it your way,” I mutter.

The storm is still too intense to risk flying, but my wings are still good for bursts of lift. They snap out, catching a gust that carries me over Nidhogg's head. I drive my spear down as I sail, but the blade scrapes along its nearly impenetrable scales.

Nidhogg spins, jaws snapping inches from my legs. I jab at its snout as it chases me. The first and second blows glancing off too, but the third digs into the exposed flesh of its gums. It howls, unleashing a lightning bolt that would have incinerated me if I hadn't raised my shield in time.

I hurtle back through the air, curling into a ball as I lose control, gasping as my back crashes into a root. I scrabble for a grip, my nails tearing as they scrape against the bark. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Nidhogg lumbering toward me, a claw raised to crush me. I frantically raise my spear, and it impales itself, talons sliding halfway down the shaft before stopping just short of my arm.

I wrench it free as it howls, electricity crackling through its very blood. The Bifrost crystal in my spear absorbs it—or more accurately, the Vanir storm magic contained within the crystal does. I fire my own bolt at its head, but Nidhogg just snarls as the power is absorbed back into its scales.

I settle for sprinting as it bears down on me, the impact of its talons shaking the earth. How does one kill a near indestructible dragon?!

I spin as I abruptly find myself facing an ice wall, rolling under a bolt. I stagger beneath the weight of its claws on my shield, the tips of them cutting through my armor like it isn't even there. I scream in agony, hurling all the magic in my spear at it as quickly as I can cycle through it.

Hopeful Alfheim light doesn't affect it, nor does resolute Jotunheim frost. The raging fires of Muspelheim, though, do have an effect. Its scales melt under the quick burst I throw, forcing it to back off for a moment as it reassesses the threat I pose. I almost laugh, surprised that I didn't think of it earlier. It's a creature of Niflheim; of course it can't stand fire!

My entire spear bursts into flame, the storm parting around me as I stare Nidhogg down. I bare my teeth in a vicious snarl, but the dragon doesn't back down.

I deflect the bolt it spits with my shield, and as it lunges, I let the wind fill my wings to carry me away, thrusting my spear into its shoulder as I pass. Nidhogg howls as the point pierces it, its scales melting into slag beneath the flames of Muspelheim.

I summon my spear back to me, braced for its next attack, but fortunately, Nidhogg is an intelligent predator. It retreats into the storm, recognizing that I'm a threat.

I drop to my knees in the snow, gasping for breath, my shoulder and cheek stinging where its claws raked me. My back is bruised to hell under my armor, and with my adrenaline

fading, it's a struggle to get back on my feet and trudge back toward Hvergelmir.

Without the dragon to distract me, it's easier for my soulsight to pick up what I missed earlier—the glow of Loki's soul, submerged deep within the well. I force myself to wade forward through the waters, the icy current biting at my open wounds. And when I'm treading over the glow, I dive, fingers outstretched toward the bottom.

And suddenly, the cold is gone. I'm dry, standing in an old longhouse, a band in the corner playing instruments that only the oldest einherjar still know how to play. There seems to be a party raging, populated by gods and valkyries. I catch Mist's eye in the corner, and she flashes me an alluring smile that entices me to take a step toward her before my attention is wrenched away by the main event.

Sullivan stands in the middle of the room, glowing with divine light from the inside out, laughing uproariously as weapons glance off of his skin as if they were made of foam. I snarl, stomping toward him to end his miserable life for a third time, but a gentle hand settles on my wrist. His voice stops me dead in my tracks, a voice that I never thought I'd hear again.

"Heya, Kara," Jackson chirps. "How's life treating you?"

His voice comes from right behind me, but no matter how much I spin, I can never make out his face. “Jackson?” I gasp, my voice breaking. “H-how?”

He laughs, just as vibrantly as I remember. “Helheim’s nice,” he says, “but it’d be nice if I had company.”

Is this a dream? The weight of his touch is solid, and his voice is just as I remember it. “Company?” I repeat, a chill shooting down my spine as his hand turns cold as ice.

His other hand presses something into my own—long and thin and sharp at the point. My fingers uncurl around it to reveal a dart, fashioned from mistletoe, its weight balanced in my hand.

I swallow. “Jackson, what is this?”

He tenderly guides my hand up, up, until I’m primed to throw the dart straight at Sullivan. My voice breaks, but I’m unable to stop him, his grip suddenly firm as iron. “Is this what you want, Kara?”

Before I can find my voice, we throw the dart in unison, piercing Sullivan through the chest. He drops to the ground, stone dead, and my vision blurs with tears as the party erupts into screams.

My eyes drift open slowly, weighted with lead. The sound of the storm seems muted, even though I’m not underwater

anymore. A dull ache builds in the back of my skull as I sit up, my stomach lurching as my vision swims.

There's a small weight in my hand, and when I open my palm, I see the mistletoe dart from my vision—*Laevateinn*. My mouth goes dry at the sight of it, or maybe at the realization of how perfectly it fits my palm. A dart's no good though, and as if it can sense my thoughts, the wood grows from the shaft, elongating and sprouting a dark metal point

I'm left holding a spear that's nearly identical to the one I usually wield. I turn it over in my hands, trying to sense the impossibilities that Loki claims are contained within it. There's Aesir magic, some jotunn, and of course, the dwarven foundations it's all built upon, and at its very roots, death magic. Brushing my soulsight against it feels like a macabre dance with Hel herself, her cold, skeletal fingers trailing down my collarbone.

I shiver. I have the right weapon. Now, there's only one thing left to do.

Valhalla, Asgard

2019

ᚠᚩᚱᚦᚢᚩ

Laevateinn points the way to Sullivan as if it can sense my murderous intent. He's been put up in a luxury apartment complex near the Valgrind. I can hear his pulse in my ears, pounding at the top of the skyscraper, like a prey animal who knows there's a predator after him.

Asgard typically has mild winters, but I returned from Niflheim to a snowstorm rivaling the one I had just endured. I struggle to maintain control over my flight as I ascend the tower, chasing the soul that Laevateinn and I long to claim.

I crash through the window in a violent maelstrom of shattered glass. "Sullivan!" I bellow, Laevateinn glinting sickly in the early morning light.

My breath catches in my throat as I spot him, hidden behind crossed blades. He's cowering in the back of the room like the petty crook he is, protected by two guardian angels with shadows under their eyes.

"Kara," Mist breathes, emotion straining her voice. An apology and a threat tangle in the back of my throat and stay there, caught fast. Of course she'd be here. She knows me too well.

Prima is her polar opposite, as calm as ever, even though she looks exhausted. I remember Loki's story. Surely she of all people should know that I'd do whatever it takes to avenge Jackson, but whatever fire spurred her to die for Loki has long since burned out.

“Kara,” she says in a leader’s commanding voice, “I’ll give you one chance to put Laevateinn down and walk away.”

“You know I’m not going to do that,” I growl in a voice that I don’t recognize.

Mist takes a cautious step forward. “Kara,” she repeats softly, as if she’s trying to calm a feral animal. “Please put the spear down.”

She sheathes her sword, her palms facing out as she advances. I deliver a swift jab when she draws within range, forcing her to retreat. The look of betrayal she gives me is almost enough to make me give in to her demands. Almost. Maybe I would have, if Sullivan weren’t cowering behind her.

Mist swallows, perhaps more distraught by this standoff than Sullivan is. “I know you want justice,” she says.

“So step aside.”

She flinches as if I’d struck her. Prima steps forward next, a hard edge to her eyes that says my one chance has come and gone. She raises her sword, and Laevateinn meets it, sparks spraying where they clash.

In the confines of the apartment, Prima has the advantage. Hell, she’d probably have it outside, too. While Laevateinn keeps knocking against every surface it can, her sword faces no such problems. Her cuts are swift and sure, a duelist with hundreds of years of experience.

She'd probably easily best me if it weren't for Laevateinn. The death magic purrs within the blade, pleading to be released. I release it, and a blast of mist crashes into Prima. She inhales it and drops her sword, clutching at her chest and choking on her own breath. When I tap into my soulsight, her human soul seems to have shriveled.

I whirl, stomping toward Sullivan, but Mist has found her courage. She wields her own sword, Isstad, a locus that amplifies her jotunn magic. "Kara," she says, even as she settles into a guard stance, "can we just talk? You're going to get yourself killed!"

"I don't fucking care, Mist!" I snap. "Back off!"

Mist rolls her shoulders and splits into a dozen illusionary clones of herself. It's a neat trick that might work on someone else, but only one of them has a soul pulsing in her chest. I lunge for the real one, jabbing with the butt of my spear.

When Mist parries, ice creeps up from Isstad's edge, hurtling across the spear and up my arms. I duck as she slashes, the joints of my torso locking into place, and hurl myself to the ground to shatter the ice.

My shield absorbs her next attack. I roll to my feet, blasting Hel-mist at her, but its color lightens with a wave of her hand. It rolls off of her harmlessly.

She throws a blast of ice at my feet that freezes me in place, then catches Laevateinn as I move to smash my way

free. Her eyes end up mere inches from mine, her breath gracing my cheek.

I'm acutely aware of the hammering of my heart and the sweat dripping into my wounds, the salt stinging where it mixes with blood. "Kara," she breathes, her voice charged with something heavy.

I slam my brow against hers. It hurts like hell for both of us, but unlike her, I was braced for it. She recoils and I twist free from the ice, dropping her with a blast of Hel-mist. Something within my heart breaks along with her, and I force myself to turn away. There's still work to be done.

I scan the room for Sullivan and find him missing. I scowl. The weasel must have run when the fighting began. My soulsight pinpoints him in the elevator, midway down the building.

I barrel out of the apartment, shoving past loitering einherjar as I pass. I force the elevator doors open and cut the cords controlling its descent. I hear Sullivan scream as he plummets. I dive down the shaft, landing without a sound at its base.

I slam through the hatch at the elevator's top. "Hello, Sullivan," I growl as I land before him. "I hope you remember Jackson, because you're about to reunite with him."

I stab him in the stomach before he can reply. A quick death is too good for him, after all. He coughs, blood trickling

from the corner of his mouth as he futilely attempts to pull Laevateinn from his body.

“K-kara,” he wheezes as he gives up, his body going limp against the wall. “I-I was tr-trying to tell you earlier. I’m s-sorry.”

Every muscle in my body tenses as I drive the blade farther into his gut. “Shut up!” I snarl, wishing he’d just die already so this nightmare can be over.

“I-I j-just n-needed the m-money,” Sullivan says between bloody gasps. “I-I n-never wanted to k-kill anyone. I-I’m so s-sorry...”

He trails off as the light finally leaves his eyes. My soulsight marks his soul as the frosty blue of the damned, bound for Helheim, where he belongs.

I take a deep breath, feeling lighter than I have in years. I leave Laevateinn where it rests, embedded in the murderer’s corpse, and force the elevator doors open, stepping out into the lobby.

I extend my wrists to the assembled einherjar waiting to arrest me, Prima at the front of the group. Tears run freely down Mist’s cheeks, but I force myself to remain composed. “I surrender,” I say with a smile, the hole within me finally filled.

Gjallarbru, Helheim

2020

X§¶↑↑¶®®\

It's no snake dripping venom into my eyes, but the punishment Odin selected for me is of a comparable magnitude.

There was a trial, but it was brief. In the courtroom, I learned that Mist had known I was in Niflheim thanks to Nidhogg almost killing me. She tried to get me to defend myself, but I pled guilty from the start.

From there, the Allfather himself escorted me to the Gjallarbru, the bridge that funnels newly arrived souls from the ethereal, lethal mists that compose most of Helheim to the goddess of death's domain. He dismissed the old guardian who kept the living from entering and the dead from leaving and declared I was to take her place.

That was a month ago. I haven't eaten, drunk, or slept, but my body doesn't seem to need it anymore. It's a simple job, really. Either I kill the draugr who seeks to leave, or the occasional foolish mortal with a death wish.

I do appreciate the location. I watched Sullivan's empty husk of a soul wander over the Gjallarbru, and if he tries to leave, I'll be there to end him as many times as it takes.

In between, there's plenty of time to reflect. I often gaze toward the mainland, wondering where Jackson's soul is wandering, and what he'd think of what I've done. Killing Sullivan, after all, had been to placate me more so than him. He might approve. More likely he'd condemn me, just like the new hole open in my chest did.

According to Odin, I should be killing that hole right now, but I can't bring myself to raise Laevateinn against her again.

"You shouldn't be here," I say, surprising myself with how strong my voice sounds after a month of disuse.

Mist shrugs. She's changed her hair—straight aquamarine, tied back in a long tail. I want to tell her that it looks good, or maybe that I've missed her, but all that comes out is the warning.

"Are you going to skewer me with the godkiller too?" she asks.

"That's not fair," I grumble, even though I'm acutely aware that it is. She hesitates, taking a tentative step forward, then another. It's uncomfortably like our last confrontation, except this time, I set Laevateinn on the ground to show that I mean no harm.

She embraces me, and her warmth makes me realize just how cold Helheim is. I close my eyes and drink in her rich scent of sweet chamomile.

And when we find ourselves perched on one of the Gjallarbru's supports, my new wings of bone shards brushing against her wings of ice, I'm content just to listen to her talk. She dodges the subject of Sullivan, which is fine by me, but she also avoids Alfheim, which stings just a little. Instead, she tells me about what's been happening in Asgard since I've been gone.

"Technically, I'm not even supposed to be here," Mist says, drumming her fingers against the rime-coated stone anxiously. "Only the dead are allowed over the Gjallarbru."

I hesitate. "But we're not dead."

Mist laughs, but the sound is muted. "I'm not," she agrees. "You're a horrible guardian, Kara."

"Oh, shush," I mutter, earning a more agreeable snicker. I choose not to address the implication—that I'm not technically alive anymore. I'm not sure I can stomach that just yet.

I take a moment to bask in her company before I ruin it. "Why are you here, Mist?" I ask. "Odin and Prima would be furious if they found out, wouldn't they?"

"You forget," Mist says lightly, "that I'm a lieutenant too. But yes, you're right. After I leave today, I won't be able to return..."

My heart skips a beat, and when it reengages, it pumps dread rather than blood. I'd managed to fool myself into

thinking that I'd at least have occasional company here, but if the one person I want to see can't visit, what's the point?

"So," I say, my mouth dry, "why today?"

Mist's silence tells me far more than her voice would. She has something monumental to say, and she's trying to figure out how to break the news gently.

"Do you remember how Baldur's death was supposed to be the catalyst that started Ragnarok?" she says eventually.

I think I know where she's going with this, but I play along anyway. "Yeah, of course," I say. "You don't think..."

"I wish it was still an assumption, but Odin and Mimir confirmed it when the snowstorm in Asgard didn't let up, and disasters began in all the other realms. This is Fimbulwinter."

A strained laugh escapes my lips. I suppose my sentence will be shorter than I thought. "How?" I ask, my head spinning.

"Fimbulwinter was tied to Laevateinn," Mist explains. "When Baldur fell to it, Odin was quick to act, using Niflheim's primordial frost to freeze Laevateinn in time. You broke that spell when you reclaimed it, and therefore... Ragnarok is coming, Kara."

Whatever's left of my heart shrivels up and dies right then, leaving a hollow ache where it once beat. Loki had to have known about this, and yet, he told me where it was anyway—probably because Ragnarok is when he's fated to

finally escape his prison. The snake got one over on me after all. I should have known better than to listen to a god of lies.

Mist squeezes my hand, even though I've doomed the realms. "I thought you deserved to know," she says gently.

"And... Midgard?" I venture. "How's Fimbulwinter affecting it?"

"A plague," Mist says. "They can't figure out how it started, but they're calling it a coronavirus."

I'm crying. They feel like crocodile tears, but still, I'm crying for the first time since Washington State Penitentiary. I don't regret killing Sullivan, but if *this* is the consequence... I should have taken that vacation.

Her thumbs brush along my cheekbones, wiping them dry. She cradles my face in her hands, her lips pursed.

"You didn't know," she murmurs. She doesn't say "it's okay", because it's not. She just holds me for what's likely the last time, whispering assurances that I can't bring myself to believe.