

I Bring the Fire:

Part 1 ~ Wolves

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my editor, Kay McSpadden. Kay read and reread this story more times than I can count. I also would like to thank Gretchen Almoughraby. Her suggestions helped me clarify situations and make the action more believable. Also indispensable was Laura Stogdill. She consulted on legal aspects of this story. My brother, Thomas, was great as a myth reference, my dad James Merrill Evans lent a hand in editing for content, and my mother and Christina Talbott-Clark helped with editing for grammar (I should note, if you see mistakes they are mine and mine alone). All of my readers weren't afraid to tell me when I screwed up; for that I am eternally grateful. For all their hard work, my editors may pop up in the story from time to time. I wish I could reward them more.

I also want to thank all of my fan fiction readers. Your encouragement helped give me the confidence to write this story. I love you guys!

Finally, thanks must go to my husband Eric. If he hadn't nagged at me to quit my job and work for him I still might be caught in a nine-to-five grind and the commute time would have eaten up my writing time. And if he hadn't nagged me to stop writing fan fiction and start writing something I can own, this story never would have happened.

(But don't worry fanfic readers, I don't think I'll ever be able to leave you entirely! You're too much fun.)

CHAPTER 1

The gas station bathroom off route 44 is completely lined with white tiles. Overhead a fluorescent light buzzes and flickers. The bathroom smells like urine and Pinesol. A toilet with a cracked seat sits on one side of the little room. On the other is an ancient sink, hanging off the wall.

The toilet is unoccupied. The sink is not. In it is a writhing wet creature about the size of a dachshund but heavier set and tailless, with short, dark gray fur interspersed with tufts of light gray. Holding the creature under a cloud of foul smelling, antiseptic soap bubbles from the bathroom dispenser is Amy Lewis.

A splash of suds comes right at Amy's eyes. Blinking, she looks up at the mirror above the sink. Her long dishwater blonde hair is wet and plastered to her head where it isn't pulled back in a messy ponytail. Her wide blue eyes have dark circles from lack of sleep — she got up early to start the trip from Oklahoma to Chicago. She's not wearing any makeup. She should not care; no one will see her out here. But she wishes she was wearing some under-eye concealer. Her nose has a large soap sud on it. Her wide lips are slightly chapped. She looks like she's been in her car for a week, not a few hours, and she looks far older than her

twenty-four years.

Looking down with a sigh, Amy says, “Why, Fenrir? Why?”

Fenrir, the creature, makes a non-committal yip. Some of Amy’s fellow vet school classmates insist that Fenrir is most likely a capybara, a large, tailless guinea pig-like rodent native to South America. But Fenrir’s nose is far too narrow and rat-like for her to be a capybara. Other classmates have suggested that Fenrir is, in fact, a giant rat. However, her front teeth are not rodent teeth. Fenrir is a dog...and Amy and one of her professors did a DNA test just to prove it.

A few minutes ago Amy was walking Fenrir outside the gas station. Letting herself take a break from the long drive, Amy had idly watched the sparse traffic whiz by. When she felt the jerking of Fenrir’s leash, it was too late. Fenrir was already joyfully rolling in something that would have been easier to identify before it had wandered onto the freeway, before whatever-it-was had cooked for a few days under a sweltering Great Plains sun.

“It’s okay.” Amy sighs. “I know why you did this.” Animal psychology is somewhere between a hobby and an obsession for most vet wannabes. Lifting up the still soapy, still wiggling dog, she says, “You want to be a great big bad wolf. So you rolled on a dead thing to smell like your prey.” It’s a common behavior among dogs. And possibly rats.

Fenrir yips enthusiastically and licks Amy’s nose.

“Ugh.” Wincing away from the smell of roadkill, Amy sets the dog on the floor. As Fenrir tears around the little room, Amy pulls off her fleece sweater. She’s just trying to wrap it around the little animal when a knock comes at the door.

“Just a minute,” she calls, scooping up the animal. The knock turns to a pound.

Hurriedly opening the door, she comes face to face with a middle-aged man with a puffy face and blond, almost white hair. Fenrir immediately starts growling and tries to lunge out of her arms.

Despite Amy’s ferocious guardian, the man’s eyes go directly to her chest. It’s something Amy is used to. She is generously endowed, which is why she tends to wear large shapeless shirts. They make her look fat, but it is better than the stares. Now she is only wearing a slightly damp tee shirt. Pulling Fenrir’s wet body protectively in front of her, Amy says, “I am so sorry she’s growling. Really, she hardly ever does this.”

Hunching slightly over her growling protector, Amy goes to the side and makes to slip by. The man does not move.

Amy can tell from Fenrir’s growl and frantic wiggling that the dog is close to foaming at the mouth. “Shhhh...” Amy says. “I am so sorry,” she says to the man. “She’s normally not like this.”

Well, normally Amy’s dog isn’t actively trying to lunge at people, but Fenrir isn’t precisely friendly, especially not towards males.

Outside a horn honks. The man looks over his shoulder and then steps out of the way.

As Amy walks by him, he calls out, “Are you traveling by yourself?”

The hairs on the back of Amy's neck stand on end. She turns to look at the man. He is smiling. It's a perfectly innocuous smile. She lies anyway. "No."

His smile widens as he closes the bathroom door. Fenrir makes a gurgling noise like she's choking on her own fury and nearly jumps out of Amy's arms.

Squeezing her tight, Amy says, "Really trying to live up to your namesake today?"

Amy's grandfather was a folklore buff. In Norse mythology, Fenrir was the wolf child of the Norse God of Mischief, Loki. The real Fenrir was so vicious that the gods bound him to a tree on a remote uninhabited island — but someday Fenrir is supposed to be the downfall of Odin, the head of the Norse gods himself.

Eyeing the door, Fenrir just growls.

A few minutes later Amy's in her Toyota Camry, releasing the clutch, tearing out of the gas station and on her way.

It's 768 miles from Stillwater to Chicago, mostly open road and farm land. It's about a twelve hour drive most times — and totally worth it.

The Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, is one of the best veterinary schools in the country and she's got a full ride. But she's spent every spring and summer since high school graduation with her grandparents in Chicago. There are lots of jobs in Chicago, and Amy's full-ride doesn't pay for things like rent, food, books, and the always mysterious 'miscellaneous fees' universities charge. Amy goes to Chicago to work during breaks. With occasional work as a tech for a veterinarian in Stillwater, she manages just to coast by.

Slipping a CD into the player, Amy cranks down the window. It's not so bad to have her fleece pullover off. Heat is beginning to rise off the freeway in waves. With the window down she's comfortable and the smell of wet Fenrir isn't as overpowering.

She glances over at her companion belted into a safety harness in the front seat. Fenrir's fur is starting to dry and she looks more like a rodent-like dog than dog-like rodent. As near as Amy and her vet-wannabe friends can determine, Fenrir is a mix of toy poodle and chihuahua, somehow minus a tail. Fenrir's fur couldn't decide to be chihuahua or poodle, so it's both, some places long and some places short. As it dries this oddity becomes more prominent. Her ex-boyfriend summed up Fenrir as, "Carlos meets princess, a love story gone terribly wrong."

You can't even say Fenrir is so ugly she's cute. She's just ugly. And with her less than charming personality, no one would have adopted Fenrir if Amy hadn't, which is why Amy had to.

Shifting into fifth gear, Amy says, "Well, despite the jackknifed semi in Tulsa that held us up 3 hours, and your little diversion, looks like we'll be home by midnight. Still on schedule."

Fenrir turns her panting muzzle in Amy's direction as though she's laughing at her.

After two more traffic jams, road construction, and some pit stops for Fenrir that might have been roadkill-induced, it's close to midnight and they're not even in Illinois. As Amy drives through Mark Twain National Forest, she is not the only one the road, but company is few and far between. Trees rise up on either

side of her. The air coming in the open windows is humid and hot.

Beside her Fenrir whines.

Biting her lip, Amy says, "I told you...and I told Grandma, we'll stop for the night outside of St. Louis." She should have stopped earlier — but she didn't want to deviate from her plan. Get home. Get a job. Work.

Granted, that careful planning could be undone by death. Despite the coffee she's been drinking all day, she's tired. She's getting to that stage of sleepiness when reminding her brain that if she falls asleep, she'll die, is no longer working. Her brain is rebelling, reminding her if she dies she'll be asleep. Blessed, wonderful sleep.

Amy grabs a CD from the armrest and holds it up near the steering wheel — *Nine Inch Nails, Pretty Hate Machine*. Totally retro, but with enough angst and anger to do the job.

Glancing down quickly, she hits the eject button and pulls out her current disc. As she lifts her head, an orange light in the trees catches her eye. Almost certain it's a forest fire, she briefly turns her head. It is a jet of flame, reaching high up into the sky...

And then it is gone.

She turns back to the road and sees two small lights ahead on the road. It takes a few moments for her brain to register it's a deer's eyes.

Braking and swerving quickly, Amy lets out a quick breath as her tires skid across the gravel on the shoulder. An old memory kicks in and she turns into the skid, but not fast enough. Her car slides into a shallow ditch on the side of the road. The next thing she knows the world is turning over, her neck jerking back and forth, her seatbelt cutting into her chest and hips. There is the sound of crumpling metal from the roof, and a loud crack from the windshield as it caves inward. The glass doesn't shatter completely, but it cracks into hard splinters that knock into Amy's hands. With a cry she pulls her hands away from the wheel. And then it's just the sound of her breathing as she and Fenrir hang upside down by their seat belts.

Amy swallows. It's hard to think, her heart is beating so fast and so loud. Don't cars sometimes catch fire in the movies when they tip over? That's probably overdramatized. Or not.

Get out, she has to get herself and Fenrir out of the car. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she manages to hold onto the strap and not bang her head against the ceiling. Turning, she tries to release Fenrir. It isn't easy. Just turning her neck is painful, and the little animal is whining and twisting furiously. When she finally frees Fenrir, she realizes she probably should have found the leash first. She's got a wiggling little dog under one arm, and it doesn't make crawling out of the window particularly easy.

Her headlights are still on, so she has just enough light to assess her situation. She's actually only a few yards from the road, even though it felt like she rolled for miles. There doesn't seem to be any smoke coming from the car. Nodding to herself, she tells herself all of this is good. Someone will see her from the road and call for help.

Just as she has that thought, she sees headlights approaching. Pulling Fenrir to her chest to better control

the dog and her own body's shaking, Amy walks towards the highway. A burgundy minivan approaches, slows, and then stops. Its lights go off. Amy's stomach drops.

Maybe it would have been better not to be seen. She nervously scratches between Fenrir's ears. She's being foolish. The risk of being killed by a serial killer is less than the risk of being hit by lightning, and that risk is less than 1 in 750,000. Most people are good.

Still, she freezes in her tracks.

A door slams on the opposite side of the van.

"Having some trouble?" says a voice that sounds familiar. Why should it sound familiar?

Fenrir starts to growl and jumps from her arms just as the man from the gas station rounds the front of the van.

The next thing she hears is a dull thud and a loud yelp of pain. "Nice try," says the man.

Amy has pepper spray on her keychain. Patting her pockets, she feels nothing. Her eyes widen. It has to be in the ignition. Spinning quickly, Amy bolts towards her car.

She hears footsteps behind her, and a low chuckle.

Dropping and diving through the open window, she tries to roll over to grab her keys. Before she can, she feels pressure on her ankles and the next thing she knows, she's being dragged out of her car on her stomach.

As she tries to claw her way forward, weight settles on her back and pins her to the ground. Something cold and round settles against her temple and she stills.

"Now," says the man. "You make a single peep, you struggle at all, and I'll blow your brains out."

Amy closes her eyes. She doesn't make a sound, but her brain is screaming. *Someone, anyone, help me.*

x x x x

Loki awakes with his cheek pressed to a cold stone slab, not sure where he is. This is not precisely unprecedented. What is strange is that he doesn't reek of alcohol and his mouth does not taste like vomit.

Blinking his eyes, he tries to focus. There is light, wan and diffuse as though from a northern window. There is a dull pain in his left temple, and the back of his neck is in agony. That is not so worrisome.

What is worrisome is what he doesn't see, feel, hear or taste. There is no magic in the room, no soft glow of light and shifting color, no slight tingle on his tongue and fingertips or murmur in his ear. He might as well be a dumb beast. No, it's worse than that. Beasts have some sense of magic in their whiskers, feathers, and flicks of their tongues. He might as well be a mortal human, blind to magic, and with no magic tricks save one.

His magical abilities cannot be taken from him. But magic can be removed from a place, folded back upon itself, held back for short periods of time in places of great power. Loki knows of only one such place in all of the nine realms. Which means...

Sitting up as quickly as he can with the pain in his neck, he looks around. The room he is in is lined with dull, flat, gray stones that stretch up to a high ceiling. The light is coming from a single skylight. He knows

without looking there is a door made of iron bars to his left. There will be at least one sentry on guard beyond.

He's in his home, Asgard, realm of the Aesir, in the Tower. Again. But he can't remember doing anything wrong.

Loki hears the footsteps behind him again. He recognizes them. Loki smiles bitterly. "Thor, what is the charge?"

The footsteps circle around, and there is Thor, towering above him.

"You will be told in due time," Thor rumbles. Mjölfnir, Thor's hammer, hangs at his side. But behind the shield of magic, it is just an ordinary piece of iron.

As are Loki's knives if...

Patting his body, Loki looks down. He is only in a shirt and breeches. His armor, boots and belt, and all his knives are gone.

"I don't know all the hiding places of your toys," Thor rumbles. "So I took away all the places they might hide."

Rubbing his neck, Loki winces and remembers Thor's fist connecting with his temple, and a blow to the back of his neck. "Surely I can know the charge?"

Bowing his head, Thor does not meet Loki's gaze.

Loki scowls up at him.

Thor and Loki look so alike they could be brothers. They are both red haired, though Thor's hair tends towards brown, and Loki's towards a brighter strawberry blond. Both are blue eyed, but Thor's eyes are as dark as a storm cloud, and Loki's are a pale gray. Thor has more generous features. He's slightly taller with wider shoulders, an expressive open face, prominent nose, full mouth and raging eyebrows. Loki is a bit more delicate, his chin a little narrower, and his frame leaner. Loki keeps his face clean shaven and his hair shorter — though it tends to be uneven. Thor sports a red beard, and his hair is long, though neatly groomed.

The biggest difference between them is their skin. Thor's father, Odin, leader of the Aesir, is half Jotunn, the race of the Frost Giants. Thor's mother, Jord, is full Jotunn. Despite his dominant Jotunn blood, Thor's skin is a lovely shade of gold.

Loki's skin by contrast is so pale it is nearly translucent. He does not tan. Without ointments and spells he burns. By most accounts Loki is full Jotunn. Rumors in court say his mother was Laufey and his father Fárbaumi, and he was abandoned to die as a baby after they were murdered by their own kind. There are some who whisper that while Laufey was his mother, Odin is his father, and that is why he was brought to the court when Odin found him. Whatever his origins, Loki has the ability to cast illusions like a fisherman casts line — when he has access to magical energy.

While Loki was raised by the servants of Odin and Frigga, Thor was sent away to be raised by the winged Vingnir and Hlora, and only came to court when he reached the end of his twenties. Thor and Loki were

almost friends once.

That was a long time ago.

“I was told only to see you here. Not to discuss the reason for your confinement,” Thor says with vehemence that sounds forced.

“You’ve been following the rules since your brother Baldur died,” Loki says, gingerly getting to his feet. Smirking, Loki says, “Don’t you think if there was any real hope of Odin granting you the crown he would have announced it by now?” Poor Thor.

“Watch your mouth, Silvertongue,” says Thor.

Silvertongue is one of Loki’s favorite nicknames. It’s better than Trickster, Fool, or simply Liar. Thor isn’t terribly mad at him. Still, Loki can feel a chill of worry creeping into his bones. Last time he was in the Tower, things did not go well. Smiling despite his fear, Loki says, “I can’t watch my mouth, it’s attached to my face. As are my eyes, which...”

It’s a gentle jibe, but Thor’s hands go to the front of Loki’s shirt and he’s shoved against the wall so hard his teeth rattle. Too winded to speak, Loki just stares at Thor’s face, inches from his own. Thor’s lips are turned down and his eyes are narrowed in anger...or in despair.

Feeling dread uncoil in his stomach, Loki whispers, “Oh, Thor. Has your daddy made you do something terrible?”

Loki knows something of the terrible things Odin would compel someone to do.

Releasing him, Thor drops Loki to the floor and backs away. For a moment Loki feels sorry for him.

From the door comes a sentry’s call. “Visitor to see the prisoner.”

Loki blinks. There are few people who would wish to see him.

Thor says quietly, “I was told there were to be no visitors...” but makes no protest as a slender form emerges with the sentry on the other side of the door.

“Sigyn,” Loki and Thor say almost at once.

The sentry’s key clicks in the lock and Sigyn, Loki’s ex-wife, enters.

Asgard is experiencing a 13th century European revival. Sigyn’s golden hair is held back by a circlet of braided gold at her crown. She wears a draping seafoam green dress. A cloak of moss green hangs back from her shoulders. But what catches Loki’s eye is a large golden pendant on a chain around her neck. He wonders what man has given it to her, and his heart sinks a bit.

Sigyn says nothing until the lock clicks behind her. “Has Thor told you the charges?” Sigyn says.

“No,” says Loki, turning to the other man. Thor actually looks a little afraid. Pain and death are not things Thor fears. Loss of honor, on the other hand...

Odin has convinced him to do something very bad indeed.

“They’re not against you, Loki,” Sigyn says, and Loki turns sharply to her.

Lips trembling she says, “Valli and Nari have been accused of treason by Heimdall and are to be thrown

into the Void.”

Valli and Nari are their sons.

Loki bites the inside of his cheek. He must stay in control; he must fight with his mind...that is how Loki always wins, the only way he wins.

But his hands are already going to Thor’s cloak. As he pulls Thor so their faces are just inches apart, the words he means to say in a low whisper come out a scream. “You swore an oath to protect my sons as though they were your own!”

In the hallway he hears a sentry running and shouting for help.

Thor’s hands go to Loki’s shirt, as though he might push him away, but he doesn’t. Instead he stammers, “Loki, I...” Thor stops, looks sideways, his hands fumbling at his belt.

Loki screams again. “Look at me when you lie to me, oath breaker!”

Thor’s eyes go to him. There is so much shame there — it verifies every horrible suspicion Loki has. His sons will perish, Loki will die unable to help them, and the mighty, valiant, honest Thor is to blame.

He isn’t thinking clearly when he tries to twist and throw Thor. Thor’s magic is partially responsible for his strength, but even without it he is bigger and stronger than Loki, more practiced at these things, and he isn’t completely blind with rage. All Loki can see is red, and the only thing he can feel is his blood pounding beneath his skin too hot and too fast. Too quickly Loki is pinned on the floor, snarling at Thor and reaching for magic that isn’t there.

And then Thor’s body goes limp and slumps forward. Wrestling the large frame off him, Loki looks up to see Sigyn, Thor’s hammer hanging heavy in her hands.

Loki’s eyes go wide and his lips curl. A mortal might have died from even a non-magical blow from Mjölfnir, but Loki knows Thor isn’t dead. Scrambling up from the floor, he moves to take the hammer from Sigyn and finish the job.

Drawing back, she scowls. “No.”

Loki wants to scream, wants to argue. His blood is pounding in his ears, his skin feels too hot and too tight and their sons are going to die. Killing another one of Odin’s sons seems fitting retribution.

“He let us win,” Sigyn says. “Let him live.”

Clenching his teeth, Loki stifles his protest.

Sigyn presses firmly at the sides of the pendant around her neck, and the casing in front springs open. Inside is a human-style wind-up stopwatch. “Is it working?” she says. “Hoenir gave it to me; Mimir said he’s been devising it since the last time you were here.”

Loki is about to speak, something angry and unkind, but his eyes widen instead. The stopwatch is beginning to pulse with magic.

“Yes,” Loki says, coming forward.

Staring down at it, Sigyn says, “He said that it...”

“Pulls magic from out of time,” Loki says in wonderment. “I see it...how?”

“We don’t have time,” Sigyn says. “Your armor is at the guard station. I have a hairpin; maybe you can pick the lock?”

Loki can pick just about any lock with a hairpin, but there are faster ways. Clutching the stopwatch, he pulls the magic around him. Closing his eyes he lifts his other hand towards the door. The lock clicks and the door swings open with a creak.

Without hesitation Sigyn runs out, lugging Thor’s hammer. Loki follows her into a hallway lined with empty cells. At the end of the hall is the empty guard room, a large ovoid booth set partially into a wall with glass windows on all sides.

Going forward, Sigyn says, “They found out about Valli and Nari’s dream of a constitutional monarchy.”

Loki’s heart falls. Odin is an absolute monarch not interested in sharing his power...and most Asgardians are happy with things that way.

“You knew about that?” Loki says. He’d expressly told his sons to leave their mother out of that folly.

Glaring at him, she says, “I approve of that,” and Loki looks quickly away.

As they step through the guard room door, Sigyn says, “Mimir talked the guards downstairs into letting me visit. And then he and Hoenir went back to their hut.”

Loki swallows. Hoenir and Mimir have always been kind to Loki and his family, but this...

“Hoenir and Mimir will be confined to the hut until Ragnarok,” he says, using the Viking word for the end times.

Glancing at him, Sigyn gives him a tight smile. This escape will spell death warrants for them all; he is not sure even Hoenir’s hut can protect them. From down the corridor Loki hears the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Up ahead is a small guard room with a large window looking out at the cell block. Loki’s armor and his sword, Lævatein, hang against the far wall. Entering the room, Loki and Sigyn move towards the armor as one. Without speaking, Sigyn sets down the hammer and helps Loki slip on the breastplate as he fastens his simple unadorned helmet. The helmet’s most notable feature is a visor of dwarven crystal. With magic it is shatterproof, but without magic he can’t trust it to protect his eyes. He flips it up.

Loki’s hands never collide with Sigyn’s as they finish the fastenings. They’ve done this many times before. As the last buckle is finished and Lævatein is on his hip, their eyes meet.

Since Sigyn opened the stopwatch, magic has been creeping into the tower. But his armor is still not fully enchanted, nor will his knives be. It’s doubtful they’ll make it out alive.

Loki can’t speak, and Sigyn looks quickly away.

Down the hall, a guard shouts, “Come out of there! Hands above your heads.”

Darting to the far corner, Sigyn says, “Hoenir said these magic eggs were yours, and they might help us...although the guards didn’t detect any magic in them...”

“Eggs?” says Loki. He has no magic eggs. Going to the door, he peers quickly out and catches sight of four guards. A crossbow arrow whistles and he pulls back in.

Crouching on the floor, Sigyn holds up a drab olive green knapsack with the words U.S. Army stenciled on top. “They wouldn’t let me take them to your cell — insisted on keeping them here,” she says.

Mementos from his last trip to Midgard — Earth. Loki smirks. “Throw it here.”

Sigyn tosses the bag. Catching it, Loki deftly pulls out one of six ‘eggs’. They are thankfully not magical, and therefore fully operational in the dampened magic of the tower. Pulling on the pin at the top with his teeth, he tosses the Mk 2 World War II era grenade down the hall.

For a moment nothing happens.

The guards chuckle. One shouts. “Your magic tricks won’t work here, you fool!”

Sigyn looks at him, eyes wide. Almost too late, Loki hurls himself towards her and covers her body with his. An earsplitting boom ricochets through the tower, and the glass in the guardroom window implodes and showers down on Loki’s armor.

Getting quickly to his feet, Loki helps Sigyn up. Together they step out of the guardroom and towards the stairs, avoiding the bodies of the guards, Sigyn clutching Thor’s hammer in both hands. Neither speaks.

At the top of the circular staircase, Loki takes out another grenade, swings the knapsack over his shoulder, and gestures for Sigyn to stand back.

The staircase has an echo. He hears more guards but can’t tell how far away they are. The sound of his and Sigyn’s breathing seems unnaturally loud.

“Loki, they were already taking Valli and Nari to the Center. There isn’t much time,” Sigyn whispers.

“Shhhhhh...” Loki says, trying to determine just how far away the footsteps are.

Close enough. Pulling the pin he throws the grenade at the far wall. He watches it bounce down the stairwell and out of sight. He hears footsteps, and breathing, and the grenade...plink, plink, plink down the stairs. Loki pushes Sigyn back behind him so his armor will catch any shrapnel.

“An egg?” someone says. Someone else out of Loki’s line of vision shouts.

There is another explosion accompanied by the sound of falling rock, groans, and screams. And then Loki hears a telltale whistling in the air. Before he can move, or even think, Sigyn’s body slumps against his, and Thor’s heavy hammer falls to the ground.

Lifting his head, Loki sees a guard at the top of the stairs. His face is bloodied, and he has an upraised crossbow.

A knife is in Loki’s hand and whipping through the air before he even thinks about it. There is just enough magic now that when the knife hits the guard, it explodes, and the guard crumples to the floor.

Throwing Sigyn over his shoulder, Loki looks at the hammer on the stone step. It is a powerful toy — but as soon as Thor wakes up it will rebound to his hands. Cursing silently, he turns and goes as quickly as he can down the stairs.

“Put me down,” Sigyn mutters into his back. “You have to save them, Loki. My boys...my beautiful boys.”

He’s too busy pulling out another grenade to even tell her to shut up. He hears guards mustering in the open chamber at the base of the tower. Pulling the pin just before the bottom of the stairs, he waits for the explosion and then rushes forward. Magic is thick enough in the air now for him to pull it to them and wrap them in a blanket of invisibility.

Outside the tower he sees men gathering near Sigyn’s steeds. Less well protected is Thor’s chariot. Thor favors attaching it to goats so he always has something tasty to eat, but the chariot is perfectly capable of flying on its own, and there are no goats today.

Loki slides Sigyn from his back and lays her on her side in the chariot. She is invisible to those around him, but in Loki’s eyes she shimmers and glows, as does the arrow protruding from her back. He breaks it as close to her body as he can.

“Leave me,” she whispers as he sits her up.

Glaring at her, Loki climbs into the chariot and seats himself next to her, facing the back. “To the Center,” he shouts.

The chariot rises in the air with the crackle of magic. Shouts rise up, and Loki hears the thunk of magical arrows in the floor beneath them. Flames dance near his feet as the arrows catch fire, but Thor’s chariot was designed to withstand lightning — a little fire from magical arrows won’t hurt it.

Moments later, Loki and Sigyn are whisking forward, over and through the illusions of flying buttresses and steeples that are part of this decade’s 13th century revival. There are faster ways for Loki to travel, secret ways that he alone knows. But they would leave him too drained to fight — and he can’t use them to transport others.

He’ll need all his power to fight soon. He lets the invisibility spell drop.

Narrowing her eyes in his direction, Sigyn says, “Must you always make things difficult? I’m as good as dead. You should have left me!”

Her lips are horribly pale, and the color has left her cheeks. She is full Asgardian, but looks nearly Jotunn. Leave it to Sigyn to waste her last breaths berating him. Smiling with brightness he doesn’t feel, Loki says, “My dear, have you forgotten that among some humans I am regarded as the patron god of lost causes?” Not that he believes he or any of the Aesir are gods.

Sigyn’s head lolls to the side, and she makes a sound like, “Pffftt.” She heaves a ragged breath and Loki does his best not to look concerned. “What are you planning?” she whispers, her eyelids slipping closed. “To swoop down, pick them up, and carry us all away in this bucket?”

That actually was close to Loki’s plan, but he says nothing, just glares at her one more time before standing to look out of the chariot. They are close to their destination. Nearly below them is a wide plain. In it are eight circles of white stone, each about 50 yards in diameter, with wide gates and toll booths around

and between them. The white circles are where the “branches” of the World Tree connect with Asgard. Not “branches” at all, they are places where the fabric of space and time tears easily, and the largest, most efficient, gateways to the eight other realms.

The white circles themselves form a larger circle around a small raised dais, its surface unnaturally dark. It is the entrance to the Void, where the Asgardians dump their trash, their spent potions, hopelessly broken magic tools, and the condemned.

Normally most of the circular gateways would be buzzing with merchants and delegates to visit and barter with the Aesir and each other. However, all the white circles and the toll booths at their peripheries are empty; instead, a crowd is gathered in the great dark circle at the center, their attention focused on the black dais.

From aloft, Loki can see Valli and Nari at the base of the dais, their blond heads bent, their hands bound at their backs. Behind them stands Odin, the staff Gungnir in his hands. A great armed host stands in a circle around Odin, Loki’s sons, and the dais. A crowd of civilians from the friendly worlds mill about in a dense crowd just beyond the warriors.

“Have you forgotten the Valkyries?” Sigyn asks.

There is a stirring below among the armed host. In the distance Loki sees Heimdall, the guardian of the gates, pointing in their direction. Around Heimdall, the Valkyries, winged warrior women, rise. Bolts of fire hurtle toward the chariot from the staffs in their hands. Loki slumps down next to Sigyn.

“Actually,” he says, “I did forget about them.”

Sigyn takes a deep, ragged breath. Clutching the edge of the chariot, Loki tries to clear his head as they rock under the Valkyrie onslaught.

“Chariot, down!” he says. He nearly loses his seat as the chariot falls. “Gently,” he cries and the descent slows. “Move to hover just above the crowd!”

As Loki suspected, the barrage of fire stops as they get close to the civilians.

“What are you doing?” Sigyn whispers.

“I can’t help you,” Loki says, pulling a grenade from the olive green bag. “I’m no good at healing...and this bucket will never get close enough to Valli and Nari.”

He looks down. They’re close enough to the ground. Smiling at Sigyn, he says, “Chariot, to Hoenir’s hut!”

“What!” says Sigyn, the anger in her voice nearly blood curdling.

Loki jumps out just before the chariot takes off, and Sigyn’s scream fades away. The crowd parts only enough for him to land. Straightening quickly, he holds the grenade above his head and smiles across the crowds in Odin and Heimdall’s direction.

“What do you have there, fool?” someone says.

“A rotten egg,” he responds with a grin.

The crowd closes in around him. From where they stand, now on top of the dais, Loki hears Valli or Nari

shout, “Father!” The crowd starts to roar, but then Odin’s voice rings out, “Let him pass!”

Odin knows Loki is no fool.

The crowd parts and murmurs. Loki walks forward, still smiling, still clutching the pin of the grenade. He is within a few paces of the dais when Odin thumps the black stone beneath his feet with Gungnir and shouts, “Stop.” The rich velvet blackness that is Odin’s magic whips out across the plain.

Loki’s legs suddenly feel like lead. He feels like the gravity in Asgard has increased by ten, as though he’s consumed vast quantities of magical energy, enough to set a world on fire. He blinks, takes a breath, and moves onward. It takes him a moment but then he realizes that the crowd is dead silent, and except for Odin and him, no one seems to be moving.

“Nice trick,” he says. An incredibly powerful trick. Odin must be using nearly all of Gungnir’s power for this. Not for the first time Loki wishes he’d never given Odin the damn thing. Loki’s eyes flit nervously to the side. Just beyond the plain he can see Odin’s raven messengers, Huginn and Munnin, soaring through the air, and he almost sighs with relief. Not everything has stopped.

He looks up to Odin. Unlike the other Aesir who all chose to appear closer to the age of 25, Odin appears to be near the human age of 50. He wears a patch over a missing eye; he purportedly exchanged that eye for wisdom. As Loki draws closer, he sees Odin’s one eye widen, as though in alarm.

Loki blinks, and Odin’s gaze is its normal steely calm. “You have something you wish to discuss?” Odin says.

Walking up and around until he stands just a pace from Odin, his back to Valli and Nari, Loki says, “Let my sons go.”

“I don’t think you understand how dangerous Valli and Nari have become,” Odin says, his one eye unblinking.

Scowling, Loki says, “You’re wrong.” They aren’t strong in magic, not like Helen.

“No,” says Odin. “I am not.” Sighing, Odin says, “You know I will do anything to preserve the safety of the nine realms.”

Loki waves a hand. “Yes, yes, I know. Even allowing the death of your own beautiful son.” Tilting his head he sneers. “I’m not that selfless.”

“Loki,” Odin says. “There are things happening now, new passages opening between the realms that should remain closed, branches from other realms approaching ours. Asgard cannot afford to be divided by this idea they have...this democracy...”

Rolling his eyes, Loki says, “It’s more of a proto-democracy, hardly a threat.”

“Heimdall and the Diar demand this,” Odin says, thumping his spear again. “For the stability of the realms, for order, I must do what must be done.”

Loki’s eyes flick to the immobilized figure of Heimdall, the “all seeing god” of order. He and Loki do not get along well.

Loki looks back at Odin. How long has he carried the weight of Odin's desire to preserve the nine realms? How long has he carried Odin's secrets? How often has he, as the Christians say, turned the other cheek...after Helen?

For Helen alone Odin owes him. "Let them go," Loki whispers. "Or you make me your enemy."

Odin blinks, and for a moment Loki imagines he sees hesitation. The other man's face softens, perhaps in compassion or understanding. Odin certainly can't be afraid of Loki. For a moment everything is worth it: obeying Odin, playing the fool, letting himself be cast as the coward, the shirker. But then Odin bangs his spear down three times and Loki feels the air pressure behind him drop.

"Hurry and you might catch them," Odin says, his face flat.

With a cry of rage, Loki pulls the pin from the grenade, hurls it into the air, and rushes up the stairs of the dais. The sky is already opening up to the Void, a long tear in space time, like the funnel of a tornado twisting downwards.

Loki sees Valli spin so his back is to Nari's side, and then they are gone, sucked up into the blackness. With a cry Loki follows, dimly aware of the ring of the grenade behind him.

In the glow of starlight, and nearly spent and broken magical objects, Loki sees his sons hovering before him, their mouths and eyes open wide, Vali's hands desperately clasped around Nari's scabbard. They've never been in this place before, but Loki has. Fifteen seconds. They can survive 15 seconds in the vacuum of space. Loki tries to use the threads of magic to move towards them, for what purpose he doesn't even know. So they can all die together?

It is the only plan he has, but as he tries to implement it, something sucks him backwards.

Loki looks down in panic. A renegade branch of the World Tree, another tear in space and time has caught him...but there shouldn't be one here. He looks back up for an instant and sees his sons vanish. Were they pulled backwards by another renegade branch? Suddenly there is a flash of color, and then he is blinded by sunlight, gasping in hot, humid air and falling backwards to the ground.

He failed. His world is gone. Blackness overtakes him.

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Loki hears a voice, like a child's, say, "Zd`rastvuyte," and then, "'Kak `Vas za`vut?"

He opens his eyes. Loki has the gift for tongues, but it takes him a moment to recognize the language. A very powerful magical something is saying, "Hello. What's your name?" far too cheerfully in Russian. He looks around — he's in a forest on Earth. Instead of Russia, the stars overhead suggest the continent of North America. There is magic in a thick red glow around him like a mist. Whatever it is, the magic is very powerful. But there are no magical creatures on Midgard anymore, just beasts and humans, with their one, very weak, though intriguing, magical trick.

"Loki," he says. Whatever the Russian speaking mist is, he doesn't want to annoy it.

"You hear me, Comrade!" says the thing, still in Russian. Its voice fades; the mist dissipates.

Loki is alone on the ground. He is too filled with despair to worry about the magical Russian-speaking creature. Sitting up, he pulls up his knees, leans forward and buries his face in his hands. He sees Sigyn slumped in the chariot, he sees his sons' terror-stricken faces in the Void flash before his eyes. He remembers the way they clung together, Valli clasping his hands to Nari's scabbard.

...The scabbard! Nari's scabbard. Long ago Loki gave it to him as a gift. Nari is an anglophile and the scabbard comes from that isle. It is enchanted to protect the bearer from harm. Is it powerful enough to save its bearer in the Void? Perhaps it could suspend them in time, just as Odin did to the crowd with Gungnir?

It is such a slim hope that Loki drops his hands and laughs. But he has to believe it. Not because it's likely, but because he must believe it or he might stay here, in this spot, in this forest for a millennium.

He swallows and assesses his situation. Physically he is unharmed, but he's very hungry. Using magic always makes him famished, and resisting whatever Odin did with his staff drained Loki tremendously.

He opens the knapsack quickly and pulls out the grenades. When he stole the grenades he also stole C-rations for their novelty. He scowls. The C-rations aren't there. Belatedly he remembers discarding them decades ago. But there is something else, something wonderful. A small book, bound in white leather, the size of his palm. It is the Journal of Lothur. Hoenir must have packed it. Loki presses the book to his forehead and squeezes his eyes shut. More than a journal, it is a book of magic with maps of many of the secret back road branches of the World Tree. Having it is a small miracle.

Not that he can open space-time to travel any of those branches now. He is famished, and exhausted.

He sees a far off glow in the distance. Perhaps it is a human habitation where he can steal food. Climbing to his feet, he starts trudging towards the glow. There is the cry of a raven above his head, and for a moment he panics. But when he looks up at the shadows of the trees he sees only common ravens, not Odin's messengers.

He hears a roar not far away. He hasn't been here since the 1940's, but he recognizes it as the sound of a roadway. It will be far easier to travel if he walks along it. That thought is just through his mind when he trips over something. Nearly falling to the ground, he curses, and a spurt of flame rises from his hand to the treetops. In the flame's orange glow he sees an outcropping of stone rising at his feet.

His flame dissipates, and he does his best to walk around the rocks in the dark.

His brain, as it is wont to do, starts to scheme. After he gets to the human village and eats his fill, then what? How will he find Valli and Nari in the Void? No, not the Void, they disappeared before he did. To what realm? He'll have to search them all.

Swallowing, he tries not to let the enormity of the task overwhelm him. He is rather good at achieving impossible things. Even Odin will give him that. Scowling at the thought of the would-be executioner of his sons, he feels his body go hot.

From up ahead he hears the sound of tires screeching and some loud noises he can't identify. He's too hungry to be curious. He just steps onto the gravel on the side of the road. Concentrating, he creates an

illusion of the attire that was popular the last time he was on this planet. His armor is still on. If anyone touches him they will feel it, but he will look like he belongs. With a deep breath he starts walking towards the lights of human habitation.

An automobile approaches him. It has a shape he's never seen before, trapezoidish, large and boxy. Thinking perhaps that the driver will give him a lift, he raises his hand. It slows for a moment, and Loki sees a flash of white hair, but then it speeds away. Loki scowls and keeps going, every step dragging more than the last.

Far up ahead the boxy, trapezoidish automobile slows and stops. Loki hears a voice in the distance and something that sounds like a growl and maybe a yelp.

A few minutes later he feels something. Something that makes every hair on the back of his neck stand on end. It's something he has not felt in centuries, the one, small, intriguing human magical trick: A prayer.

Someone, anyone, help me.

CHAPTER 2

Amy lies on the ground, one side of her face pressed in the dirt, the other side with the cold end of a gun to her cheek. She can hear her breath in her ears, or is that his breath? The guy's knee is on her back. He's silent. The hand is trembling. In fear...or...she swallows...or excitement.

Closing her eyes, she tries to remember her self defense courses she took with Grandma. The first rule was to verify that your attacker's weapon is genuine.

Licking her lips, she says, "Is that a...a...real gun?"

He laughs. "You want me to take it away from your cheek, don't you? Don't you?"

He pushes the muzzle more tightly against her, and Amy screws her eyes shut.

From the grass towards the road there is the sound of a high-pitched growl punctuated by occasional whimpering.

Fenrir! Screwing her eyes tighter, Amy desperately thinks, Fenrir, please, just distract him...

From the direction of the man's van comes another voice. "Fenrir?" Amy's heart stops. There are two guys? Oh, no.

"Who's there?" shouts the man that's holding her down. The trembling of the gun's muzzle stops and steadies.

Amy hears the snap of a twig close to her and Fenrir's pathetic growl and tiny yips a little further off.

"I'm not moving this gun from her face!" the man says.

The whimpering disappears. The high-pitched growl changes and deepens.

"What the..." her captor stutters and pulls the gun away. Amy darts into the car, rolls over and tries to yank her keychain out of the ignition, but it's jammed. Fumbling, she manages to detach the pepper spray.

She hears the sound of gunshots and the man cursing. Looking out the window, she sees an enormous wolf the size of a small pony, muzzle white with foam, crouching as though about to spring. The bullets seem

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