



Transfigured: Rise of a Spellbinder (original version)

As I seek to find a means to halt Ragnarok I find allies in the unlikelyst of places. New enemies present themselves and I learn of the cruel experiments performed by the mad Doctor Mengele. He claims he can grant men the ability to use magic, but at what cost?

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Author's Note:

This story is a continuation of the events depicted in Incompatible. It is highly recommended that you read "Incompatible: Birth of A Spellbinder" before reading this. Originally, I intended Derek, a new character introduced in this story, to be the Protagonist, but as the story progressed and I began to rethink things, he took a back seat to Aryanna.

Like the first story, this version of Transfigured, is another experiment in first person narration and the story shifts between narrators. Unlike Incompatible, this story does not utilize a journal format. Instead, each time the story shifts perspective the character's name will be listed. There are three narrators in this particular chapter of the story and I switch between them with much greater frequency than Incompatible.

I'd like to thank Holly H Hart for the spectacular job she did with the editing.

NOTE: This is the original version of the story, and it is NOT my preferred edition. The other version is longer and there are some minor differences in the overall story.



PART 1

Aryanna

I could feel the earth magic trickle down her arm and into her fist as she stared down at me angrily. Claramae and I didn't care for one another. She didn't particularly like taking orders from someone more than one-hundred years her junior. Since Athilda had fallen ill I had gradually taken on more responsibility as her heir. Whatever I tried to do as acting head of House Le Fey was met with stark resistance by my cousins. They saw me as a young interloper who had somehow managed to charm Athilda into naming me heir. I really didn't want any of it, but I didn't have much choice. I needed every resource I could use if I were to prevent Ragnarok from becoming a reality.

She swung her fist at me, but I was too fast. I quickly brought my hands up and sent a huge gust of wind magic at the older woman. She soared nearly fifteen feet before landing gracelessly on her ass. Few Spellbinders were as powerful or as skilled with wind magic as I, and I found it was an effective means of defending myself. I walked calmly over to where my underling now lay in a rather awkward heap and stared down at her. "When I tell you to do something, Clara. You do it. You got it?" I said coldly.

Her lip twitched angrily, "Yes, Revered Lady."

"Good," I said calmly. "Get back in place. You will follow Agent Jensen's orders explicitly. You got that?"

She scowled up at me as she scrambled to her feet, "Yes." She said between clenched teeth then ran off to do as I had ordered.

Claramae's issue in this particular instance had to do with taking order's from a man. I found him to be a competent professional, but Claramae saw him as just another worthless man. Agent Alf Jensen had been given command of the Task Force Against Domestic Terrorism for purely political reasons. Most domestic terrorists were affiliates with extremist men's rights groups and the Central Investigation Bureau felt that to avoid any backlash or accusations of sexual discrimination it would be best to put a man in charge.

Of course, I had been named a 'consultant' for similar reasons. Obviously I was no man, but as the only known Spellbinder to be born a man it made sense for me to be involved, or at least the bureaucrats of the CIB thought so. My actual involvement was considerably more than a mere consultant, but it looked better on paper to call me one.

Sighing wearily. I walked over to the overhang's edge and looked down on the compound. About twenty feet below was a well concealed compound which, if my sources were correct, was a major base of operations for the Sons of Odin. Hopefully, we'd even find Jonas Talman, their mysterious leader within the compound.

I stood silently over the cliff, then once the signal for attack was given I called upon my wind magic and drifted down the face of the cliff toward the compound.



PART 2

Derek -Three nights prior:

"Power, it's what it all surmounts too," the speaker bellowed. "The Spellbinders have it and we don't. To gain an equal footing we must use any means to accomplish our goals. We must turn the people against the ruling class and ignite the fires of violence against all who would stand in our way."

I shook my head as the rest of the crowd cheered. I had come to the rally against my better judgment now I found myself wishing I had stayed away. This group seemed more interested in spewing out hate-filled rhetoric than they did in making a difference. There had to be a better way. If we reduced ourselves to that level how were we any better than the Spellbinders believed us to be? How could we gain equality by proving our oppressors right?

I stood and started working my way away from the crowd. Just as I had nearly gained the exit to the pavilion the man called out. "Brother! Why are you leaving? Don't you wish to cast off the shackles of oppression?" I swirled around and found the crowd facing me.

I pursed my lips, "Hatred and violence won't solve our problem, brother." I said putting particular emphasis on the last word and stepped out of the pavilion and into the night.

Tired and ready to return my home in Epegard. I made my way through the parking lot and stopped just a few steamcars short of my battered old NMC Vision. Two men were waiting at my car and they didn't look very friendly. I ducked behind a nearby Ford Pygmy, but clearly the men had spotted me as I soon found myself surrounded on either side. The shorter of the two, a burly man with a goatee drew close and grabbed hold of the collar of shirt, "Well look what we have here, Vili." he said with a malicious glint in his eyes. "Someone has decided to leave the party early."

The other man, Vili, came up beside me and placed his hand on my head, "You think the boss'll like this one, Jakob?"

The shorter man, Jakob, grinned, "Why yes, Vili. I think he will."

Jakob's hands loosened from around my collar, and I chose then to make a break for it. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in the back of my head and then there was only darkness.



"...nally," a voice said out of the fog and I sat up with a start. I found myself in some sort of holding cell with an older man standing over me.

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"Easy there," said the man. He had a mane of wild white hair and a long unkempt beard. "You're not in any immediate danger." He smiled down at me and something about the old man made me think I could trust him.

I ran my hand through my short-cropped black hair and felt a sharp twinge of pain as my hand passed over the back of my head, "Where am I?" I mumbled warily.

The oldster grinned, "Well I ain't too sure about that. I reckon we're somewhere outside of Epegard."

"What is this place?" I asked.

The oldster frowned, "Norns, if I know. You'd need to ask one of them sumbitch Sons of Odin who locked us up."

"The Sons of Odin," I breathed, "Those two thugs who attacked me after the rally." I scrambled to my feet and turned to face the man. "What do they want with us?"

The old man shrugged, "Who knows? They ain't said anything. Say what's your name?"

"Derek Hines," I said. "Yours?"

My companion gave me a toothy grin and said, "The name is Cletus Montgomery. Most folk just call me Monty. I would say it's nice to meet you, but these ain't the most ideal of circumstances are they?"

"No," I agreed.

Monty seemed like a very nice person, but I wasn't much interested in conversation. Perhaps he sensed this because a deep silence soon settled between us. I didn't like being locked up. I examined my surroundings in greater detail. The cell had a single barred door and was set within a slightly larger room with a single steel door leading outside. The only source of light was a single electritorch which was wholly inadequate for the task of lighting the room. I doubted I would find any means of escape, but I tried nonetheless. I tested the bars for weakness and even tried to force the cell door open.

I gave up and finally sank to the floor and waited for something, anything, to happen. The hours dragged by and we passed the time by conversing with one another. Monty did most of the talking and I was glad to let him do so. He told me about growing up in the province of North Bannock, and his many travels across the country. He told a good tale, though I had the feeling he was stretching the truth in many places.

A few hours more, and a man appeared and gave us each a tray of food. He didn't say anything and I couldn't get a response out of him even after issuing a number of insults. I did note the guard that waited outside the door as the man who brought the food left.

I had no sense of time, but I think several days passed by and then we were joined by three more men. None of whom had a clue what was going on.

Finally, many hours after the arrival of our final companion something did happen. A man with an odd-looking handgun tucked into his belt, appeared from beyond the steel door. He gave us a slimy smile as he looked us over, "Traitors to the cause, each and every one of you," he said his smile shifting into a look of distaste. "That's why you've all been brought here."

He pulled the handgun from his belt, took aim and pulled the trigger. Something hit me right in the shoulder and I had just enough time to recognize the object as a tranquilizer dart before collapsing into a heap and losing consciousness.



"This one show promise," said a raspy voice out of the darkness.

I didn't move a muscle, not wishing for my captors to know I was awake. "What about the others, doctor?" Asked a

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booming male voice.

The raspy-voiced doctor chortled, "We doubt they will survive the procedure, but even in death they should provide us with useful data."

"Very well, doctor. Rolph will be outside should you need anything," the booming voice said. I heard footsteps and the sound of a door opening and closing.

A few moments passed then the doctor spoke, "He is gone. You can stop pretending to be unconscious."

I opened my eyes and was assaulted with the strangest sight I had ever laid my eyes on. The person that stood before me appeared to be half-male and half-female. He looked as if someone had split a man and a woman in half from head to foot then joined a half from each into a single person. The male side looked scarred, contorted and twisted out of shape while the female side was the model of feminine beauty.

The man/woman laughed a wheezing pathetic sort of laugh, and I couldn't escape the feeling that this person wasn't entirely sane. "You see the results of our experimentation. We are called Doctor Josef Mengele."

The creature stepped toward me and I noticed then that the feminine side of his body was actually shorter than his male side causing him to walk with a strange hobbling motion. The creature smiled, "Rolph remembered the restraints this time."

I tilted my head up and noted the straps around my wrists. I tried to move my legs and noted that they too were strapped to the table. "What exactly is it that you intend to do with me?"

The doctor grinned down at me, "Fifty years ago we thought we had perfected a formula to grant men the ability to use magic. So anxious were we to see the results of our formula, we tested it on ourselves. We did gain some small use of the magic, but the formula had unforeseen results." the doctors growled angrily. "We were transformed into this creature you see before you. Neither female nor male, but somehow both."

I gulped nervously and watched as the doctor continued on his tirade, "For fifty years we have tried and failed to perfect the formula. Sometimes we think we are so close we can taste it."

I struggled in my bindings but it was to no avail, there was no way I could get loose. The doctor chortled and picked a syringe up off a nearby table, "Try as you might you won't get free."

The doctor plunged the syringe into my arm and once more I drifting into unconsciousness.



PART 3

Aryanna

The compound was heavily fortified and we took some losses as gun fire was exchanged between the Sons of Odin and our own men and women. I didn't wait for the strike force to find an entrance, I made my own. I summoned my magic and blasted a hole into the wall. I walked calmly into the compound and found myself in a hallway with dozens of doors on either side. I followed the hallway into a rather large room and found a dozen men within. All of them with assault rifles pointed right at me.



Derek

"Wake up," came the raspy voice of Doctor Mengele. My eyes fluttered open and I found him standing over me with an anxious look on his face. "They're attacking the compound," he said with barely contained rage. "We are so close and they attack now."

The doctor loosened the straps on my wrists and I looked at him uncertainly, "What's going on?"

"Haven't you been listening?" he growled at me angrily. "The Seidskati have found us. You've been injected with the revised formula. We must escape or all our work will be for naught."

I extricated my hands and legs from the straps, hopped off the table and advanced on the doctor, "They've coming for you, not me."

He chortled, "You think they will take kindly to a man who can use magic? Better if you come with us. We can monitor your progress and assure there aren't any unforeseen side effects."

I nodded as if what he said was perfectly reasonable. "You're right," I said. "Let's get out of here."

As the doctor turned to leave I grabbed a tray off a nearby table swept the instruments off it and slammed it into the back of Mengele's head or tried too. The doctor ducked just in time to dodge my attack. Then with incredible strength he forced the tray from my grip. Before I could even think to defend myself the doctor raised the tray and then there was only darkness.

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Aryanna

"Hold your fire!" came a voice from out the crowd of armed men.

A man came forward and stood before me. I gasped as I recognized him, "You," I muttered. "You're Jonas Talman aren't you?"

The slightest smile cracked at the corner of the man's face, "Me? No, my name is Nicholas Flint. I would say it's a pleasure to see you again, but I hardly think these are pleasurable circumstances."

I shook my head, "I always wondered what became of you."

He smiled, "You saved my life and I hold no personal grudge against you. If you surrender I promise you will not be harmed."

I sighed, "You know I can't do that."

Nicholas smiled sadly, "I had to ask." He said turning his back and walking back towards his men, "May your journey to Valhalla be swift and assured," he said. "Men! Open fire!"

Bright flashes of light appeared as a barrage of bullets flew my way. I raised my arms and called forth a shield of spirit magic and watched calmly as the bullets bounced harmlessly off my barrier. I really had no desire to kill Nicholas' men. I reached deep within myself and wove a web of wind, water and spirit magic and sent it hurtling throughout the room. When all was said and done a full dozen men lay on the ground unconscious with only minor injuries.

At the moment I had bigger fish fry so I left the sleeping forms of the combatants and continued my search for Jonas Talman.



The last of the opposing forces had been squelched and I moved through the ranks of the CIB towards Agent Jensen.

"Any sign of Talman?" I asked as I approached.

He shook his head, "We're still sorting through this mess, but I have feeling Talman has managed to slip away again," he said warily. "We did find something we haven't run across before. We've found evidence to suggest Talman was conducting experiments."

"What sort of experiments?" I asked.

Jensen hesitated for a second. "It's better if you see for yourself," he said. Then led me through the scene and to an area where an ambulance had been parked. He excused the agent guarding it then swung the door open. Inside was the inert figure of an old man. I hopped into the ambulance and knelt next to the unconscious figure. I placed my hand on his cheek and sent a trickle of spirit magic into his body and watched as he came awake.

"Where am I?" he said in a raspy voice.

"You're safe now," I said reassuringly. "What's your name?"

The old man looked very much the worse for the wear as he struggled to speak, "Cletus Montgomery The doctor..."

I slunk closer to the old man and began to weave a spell of healing as I reached into the deepest recessed of his body. My magic came up against a barrier. I was so taken aback that I jumped back from the old man and fell down on my ass.

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Magic! The old man's body had instinctively summoned a magic barrier against my perceived intrusion.

"Dammit," I muttered angry and prepared myself for another attempt. The old man lightly touched my hand.

"Mengele," he said with a gasp. I tried to silence him but he shook his head stubbornly, "You must..." He gave one final gasp and a moment later he was gone.



PART 4

Derek

"Good you are awake," the doctor cackled as my eyes fluttered open.

I tried to move, but found my movement hindered by the shackles I found around my wrists and ankles. "We are most disappointed in you," he said frowning down at me. "We trusted you and you attacked us."

I didn't say anything I just stared up at the doctor defiantly and he continued speaking, "You have started to change."

"Change how?" I demanded.

The doctor cackled. "You will see," he said then turned away and I was left alone in the darkness.



Aryanna

"I need you," I said, sitting down and slapping Nicholas' folder onto the table in front of me.

Nicholas smirked, "I don't really think this is right place for that, darlin'."

I grimaced, I had walked right into that one. I flipped open the folder and began to read from it, "Colonel Nicholas Flint of the 5th Field Artillery Regiment, twice decorated. I need someone with your unique skill set. Are you interested?"

Nicholas glanced at the concealment shroud on the other side of the room and gave me an appraising look, "In case you haven't worked it for yourself. I'm likely to go to prison for a long time."

I smiled, "There are ways around that."

Nicholas glanced back at the shroud, "You can speak freely," I said. "They can't hear us."

Nicholas looked me over suspiciously, "You're the one responsible for getting me locked up. Why would I want to help you?"

I sighed, "I saved your life, remember? This is much bigger than either of us. If you knew what I knew, you'd realize that

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there is much more at stake than men's rights."

He gave me an amused look, "Oh yeah?" He said, "Like what?"

I wasn't getting through to him. Clearly he was going to buy what I had to sell. I'd just have to change that. I reached across the table and gripped either side of his face, "Hey wha-" he started to say but suddenly stopped mid sentence as his eyes clouded over and he seemed to fall into a trance.

A few moments later his hands came up and broke my grip on my face, "Odin's bones!" he said his eyes wide. "It can't be true."

I looked him straight in the eyes and said, "What I have shown you is the truth. It's up to you whether you chose to accept my offer. Freedom in exchange for your assistance."

I stood up and was about to leave when Nicholas called after me. "Wait! Assistance with what?" He asked.

I grinned wickedly, "I think you already know the answer to that. Should you chose to accept, tell your interrogator that you will only speak with me," I reached for the door and left Nicholas sitting in stunned disbelief.



[Derek](#)

Suddenly and without any warning the finger tips on my right hand burst into excruciating pain. They felt if they had been run through a meat grinder. In the dim light I brought my hand up to my face and watched in horror as my finger tips shrunk and went from chocolate brown to a much lighter tan color. The pain faded but didn't completely disappear.

I was changing, that much was obvious, but into what? Would I change into something resembling the doctor? It seemed likely, but what if I didn't get stuck between forms as the doctor had? Would I change into a woman? I shook my head in frustration. I just didn't know.

In the distance I heard a loud clang and the sound of the doctor's characteristic walk. "How is our specimen?" Mengele asked as he approached with what seemed to be genuine interest.

"I'd be much better if you set me free," I replied.

The doctor chortled, "We cannot do that! We are granting you a great gift. Think of it! You shall have the power to use magic."

I grimaced, "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't want to end up like you. Just look at what your formula has done to me!" I said raising my hand.

The doctor took one look and started to shriek, "The formula shouldn't be doing this! Our revisions should have seen to that! We've failed!"

"Perhaps not all is lost," a new voice said out of the darkness. "If the subject completes the transformation you could use the revised formula to complete your own transformation, my love."

A weird sort of wistfulness seemed to pass across the doctor's face, "Of course," the doctor grinned. "Then we can be together again."

The doctor's reply was met only with silence, "Our lady is very wise," he said happily. Then he pulled a needle from his coat and jabbed it into my arm. Once more I drifted into unconsciousness.



PART 5

Nicholas

I was back in my prison cell and was drifting off to sleep when a voice spoke out of nowhere, "Well," a woman's voice purred. "What have we here?"

I opened my eyes and looked to see a leggy brunette standing on the opposite side of my cell. I can't quite explain it but she seemed to have a calming effect on me. "You think calling yourself a son of Odin makes you somehow different from other men?" she continued. "And here I thought all men were sons of my dear husband."

Had I heard right? Had she just claimed that she was the wife of Odin? But that would mean... "By Odins Bones!" I said and fell to my knees.

The Goddess Frigg rolled her eyes, "You're almost as bad Aryanna. Get up and stop invoking the name of my dead husband."

Slowly I stood and looked the Goddess in the eyes. "What would you have of me?"

The Goddess threw her head back and laughed, "Now that's more like it! You were approached by my dear servant, Aryanna. It would please me to no end if you were to join her in our cause."

A looked at the Goddess stubbornly, "To stop Ragnarok?" I said folding my arms across my chest. "Isn't the world supposed to be transformed into a paradise after everything is said and done? Why would I want to stop that? What's in it for me?"

The Goddess eyes glinted with amusement, "My you are a bold one! Very well mortal I'll make a bargain with you. Should you agree to help and you are successful in halting Ragnarok, I will see to it that the playing field between the sexes is leveled."

"You'll give us the ability to use magic?" I asked eagerly.

Frigg shook her head, "Impossible, unless you would like a nice set of breasts on your chest and a pair of lips between those legs. No, there are others means by which men can gain power."

I wanted so desperately to know exactly what sort of power the Goddess was offering, but I also knew it wasn't wise to look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially when the horse was being offered by a being of immense power. I said simply, "It's a deal."

The Goddess smiled then vanished as if she had never even been there. As soon as she disappeared I called to the guard and asked that I be allowed to speak with Aryanna Le Fey.

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Aryanna

Nicholas Flint looked up as I stepped through the door. "I knew you'd come around," I said with a smile as I sat down across from him.

He shook his head, "Are you free to speak?"

I nodded, "Of course."

Nicholas hesitated for a moment then spoke, "Ragnarok. I can't hardly believe it might actually be coming. What exactly can we do about it?"

I sighed and looked him in the eyes, "We can fight. I have reason to believe that Ragnarok can be halted."

"It appears we have a mutual acquaintance," he said a look of determination passed across his face then faded almost as quickly.

A smile touched the corner of my lips, "Oh yeah? Who would that be?"

Nicholas hesitated again. "Frigg," he muttered in a whispered tone.

I was a bit surprised that the Goddess would have bothered talking to the revolutionist. She hadn't contacted me since our first encounter and I was beginning to wonder if the steps I was taking to halt Ragnarok were enough. Since becoming a full Spellbinder I had done everything I could think of, but I had been assailed with doubts from the very first day. Perhaps this was a sign that I was headed in the right direction.

"I'm assuming she managed to convince you of the importance of this," I said concealing my surprise as best I could.

Nicholas nodded and a smile crept across his face, "Just tell me where to sign up."

I nodded, "First I need some information," I said. "Tell me about Mengele."

Nicholas scowled, "I never liked having that freak around. I tried to convince Flint that we didn't need Doctor Mengele, but Flint insisted."

"You call Mengele a freak. Is that because of the experiments?" I asked.

Nicholas shook his head and sighed, "Fifty years ago, Mengele developed a formula that he thought would give men the ability to use magic. He tested it on himself. The results aren't pretty. He's half-male and half-female."

"Like some sort of hermaphrodite?" I asked.

He shook his head, "No, one side of his body is male the other is female."

I shook my head warily, "That explains a few things. What about Flint, where can I find him?"

Nicholas sighed, "I wish I knew. He's been in hiding for the better part of a year."

"There will be someone in to interrogate you shortly," I said standing to leave. "Tell them whatever they want to know and your freedom will be assured."

"Wait!" He called after me, "Where are you going?"

I gave him a knowing look, "To find Mengele, of course."

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"Lady," the white-clad Elf said with a slight tilt of his head. "I am called Heime."

Good Goddesses, Heime was gorgeous. I couldn't keep my eyes of him. I tried to not let it show as I spoke, "We have met before. Haven't we?"

Heime smiled, "Indeed, 'twas I who didst vanquish the Dokkálfur that had come upon thee six years ago. It was most unfortunate that our first meeting was so fleeting. Thou art truly beautiful and I find myself unable to take mine eyes away from thy aspect."

I found myself blushing at the Lejoálfar's words. It seemed odd that I would suddenly find myself attracted to a man when I had never had such feelings before. Then I thought back to my meeting with Elf Queen and remembered I had to restrain myself from tearing her clothes off. Maybe it wasn't me, maybe it was him. I shrugged off my strange attraction and attempted to excuse myself. "It really was a pleasure to see you again, but I really must be going."

"I am afraid, my Lady, that it is most urgent we speak," the Elf said apologetically. "My mother, the Queen, has sent me in regards to thy debt."

I sighed, "It really isn't a very good time. Can we speak later?"

The Elf shook his head and smiled sadly, "It is most urgent that the debt be fulfilled now."

I sighed remembering the importance Frigg had placed on fulfilling the debt, "Very well," I said. "What exactly do I need to do?"

The Elf smiled apologetically as he detailed just exactly what his mother wished me to do. I couldn't believe my ears. It was not at all what I would have ever expected.

"Very well," I said with a nervous lump in my throat as I took the Elf's hand and summoned forth a travel spell.



PART 6

Derek

I gasped in agony as the pain crept up my arm and produced more changes. This time the pain lasted for well over an hour and by the time it had ceased my entire right arm and part of my shoulder had changed. My new arm was extremely stiff and sore and it was incredibly difficult just to get it to move.

I examined my arm as best I could in the dim light. It was a lot smaller and far less muscular and even looked dainty compared to my other arm. The skin color on my right arm was much more reminiscent of that of my mother's than my own chocolate brown. My mother was half-Japanese and had always favored the Japanese side of her family. I had always favored my African ancestry, but apparently the formula was changing that.

Because of the shackles on my wrist I couldn't take my shirt off to see my shoulder, but it did look oddly disproportionate under my shirt.

I expected the doctor to reappear, but he never did. At one point a tray of food was slid in front of me by a shadowy figure, but I never saw its face. I had to eat using my left arm since my right arm was so sore it was all but useless.

I have no idea how long I sat there in the dim light, but I eventually drifted off to sleep. When I awoke my shoulder had burst into pain and more changes followed.



Aryanna

My debt to the Elf Queen had been fulfilled, but at what cost? What good would it do? I couldn't understand how fulfillment of that debt would help me prevent Ragnarok. I shook my head in frustration. It wouldn't do to obsess over it. I had to find Mengele. Finding the doctor would, hopefully, answer some questions.

I knew someone who might be able to tell me where to find the doctor, but persuading them to give up the information would be the trick. I called forth a travel spell and disappeared with a great gust of wind.



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The Dvergir stumbled about drunkenly down the street and I had no problem following him. I was several blocks before he came to a halt and I chose then to make my presence known. "Brokk," I said out of the shadows.

Brokk stumbled to his knees. "Who there?" He asked with a pronounced slur.

I stepped into sight and smiled down at the diminutive creature. He resembled a very short human. His nose gave him away. It was much too large for his face and resembled a turnip. "You," he grunted and drew a small battleaxe from his belt. I summoned a bit of magic and sent the blade tumbling out of his hands.

"Now now, Brokk," I said with a cheerful smile. "Let's play nice."

Brokk let out a loud belch and scowled up at me. "Lass," he growled. "Leave me be. I'm in no mood fer yer questions, now."

I sent earth magic down my arm and used the extra strength my magic granted me to force the Dwarf off his feet and up against the wall of a nearby building. "I have no time for this, Brokk. I need answers now. I need to know where I can find someone by the name of Mengele."

The dwarf laughed, "You gonna have to make it worth me while I thinks."

Sighing wearily I released the dwarf and let his feet sink back down to the ground. "What exactly will it cost me this time?" I asked.

The dwarf smiled, "Word 'mong my cousins is Ragnarok's acomin'," he grunted, "and that Frigg's gone and chosen you to keep it from happenin'."

I didn't know how the dwarf had learned this, but it didn't particularly surprise me. The dwarves were renowned for their information gathering skills. "I figure you be needin' to raise yerself an army."

This could actually work to my advantage. "You want to make me weapons, Brokk? Assuming I needed those weapons, exactly how much would that cost me?"

The dwarf stroked his chin, "Aye, I wants to make you weapons. As fer the price. Yer ancestor owns a peace of property that the Conclave would be mighty interested in having. If we were to receive said property we might be inclined to make you them weapons."

I had no idea what property of the Dvergar Conclave would be interested in, but the only reason the dwarves would want any property would be to mine it. "Uh-huh," I said folding my arms across my chest. "Where exactly is this property?"

The dwarf belched again, "Alfheim."

"Alfheim?" I asked. "Athilda owns land in the home of the Light Elves? That's crazy. How in Hel could she own property there of all places?"

The dwarf shrugged, "Give us the land and I will tell you what you want ter know."

"You know I will have to speak with Athilda about this don't you?"

The dwarf laughed again, "I figerd that'd be the case."

Sighing warily I shook my head. "I'll be back," I said warily then called forth a travel spell and vanished with a great torrent of wind.



PART 7

Derek

Shortly after this newest batch of changes started the doctor finally decided to show up. He came over to me as I lay on the ground convulsing in agony. "Painful isn't it?" he asked sounding almost sympathetic.

The pain was so overwhelming that I couldn't have answered even if I had wanted too. "Let us see." Mengele said and tore open my shirt.

I saw much to my horror that the changes had started to work on my right nipple which was severely swollen. The area around it was slowly growing and resembled a very small breast. That wasn't the only change taking place, a trail of mismatched skin was crawling up my chest toward my neck and another down toward my waist.

The doctor smiled down at me, produced a syringe from his jacket and chortled, "We need blood." Once he had gotten it he disappeared and I continued to writhe in agony and watch in horror at the changes which were coming over my body.



Aryanna

"How is she today?" I asked my mother as I approached. After Penelope's death, Athilda hired my mother as her assistant. Now that I was acting head of House Le Fey, Mom was technically now my assistant.

Mom smiled sadly, "It's been one of Athilda's better days, but it's been a tough week for her. "What about you?" She asked in a worried tone. "You've been working too much lately. You need to get some rest. I'm sure the Goddess will understand if you take a day off."

I shook my head, "I can't afford to take a day off."

"Marion's been asking about you. She wants to see you," Mom said with a bit of smile.

My mother knew just what to say. She knew I wouldn't say no to spending time with Marion. "Okay," I said, "I'll try to find some time for her."

"I need to speak with Athilda," I said changing the subject. "Where can I find her?"

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Mom smiled, "Where else? The gardens."

I kissed my mother on the forehead. "Of course, I should have guessed. Even at this hour she can't keep away. We'll talk later."

I left my mother and walked through the house and out a door that led to the gardens. I found my ancestor almost immediately. She was knelt down on her knees trimming away at a small shrub.

"Aryanna," she said without even looking my way. "Has your mother sent you in her place to chastise me?"

"No," I said folding my arms across my chest. "But you really should be in bed. It's nearly one in the morning. The rest would do you good."

Athilda threw her head back and laughed, "I am dying, child. Rest will do me little good."

Athilda and I had had this argument before and I chose not to press the matter further. "I need your permission to sell a piece of land."

Athilda turned to look me in the eyes, "You are the Head of our house, child. You have no need to ask anything of me."

"Acting Head," I reminded her. "And this isn't any piece of land. Brokk says it's in Alfheim."

Athilda scowled up at me, "I should have known. You've been consorting with that Dwarf again."

I shook my head, "Brokk has information I need and he's agreed to make me weapons should I give him the land."

"That land was a gift from the Lejosálfar Queen. She would not be happy if you gave it to the Conclave." Athilda said.

I shook my head, "I don't really care if the Queen is happy or not," I said with far more anger than I intended.

Athilda gave me an appraising look, "Your debt to the Elf Queen," she whispered. "When did she-"

I cut her off, "Yesterday, and I'd rather not talk about it."

Athilda gave me a sympathetic look. "Give the dwarf what he wants."

I smiled, "Thank you, Athilda. Please get some rest." I said then turned to leave.

"Lilith would have been proud of you," Athilda said suddenly and I stopped in my tracks.

I turned back to look at my ancestor. "You never talk about Lilith," I whispered quietly.

Athilda nodded, "I've been a fool. She thought the Seidskati were too old and set in their ways. She felt the Council should have been disbanded. It's taken me almost five centuries, but I've come to believe she was right."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Athilda continued. "She was such a contentious child. She and I, we were always arguing. One day, I had enough, I told her to leave and never come back. I never saw her again."

I stared at my ancestor aghast. She would never tell me what had happened between her and my great-grandmother. "Athilda," I whispered quietly. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you deserve to know."

I nodded, "Thanks."

Athilda sighed, "Trust no one. There remains at least one traitor within the Seidskati."

I nodded, "Elizabeth."

Athilda shook her head, "I know your dislike for Elizabeth is strong, child, but that is little reason to believe she is a traitor."

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I shook my head, "Who else could it be?"

Athilda turned to look me in the eyes, "Many within the council might have had the opportunity."

I shook my head, "Whatever the case, I have some ideas on how I might get the traitor to reveal herself."

"Very well. Go then, child," she said with a bit of her usual irritation showing through. I nodded and summoned together some magic and disappeared with a great gust of wind.



PART 8

Nicholas

I hated confined spaces and all this time spent cooped up in my cell was starting to get to me. I had told my interrogators everything I new about the Sons of Odin and our leader. I didn't particularly like betraying Talman, but my bargain with the Goddess Frigg would do far more for Men's rights than anything Jonas would ever be able to do, or so I hoped.

I had begun to doubt Jonas ever since he had allied the Sons of Odin with the de Clissons. Especially after Jeanne had tried to kill me. But then Aryanna had taken out Jeanne, and later Olivia, and things had started to go back to the way they had been before. For a while my confidence in the leader of the revolution had been restored, but then Mengele appeared and once again my trust in Jonas had begun to waver.

I had been pacing back and forth in my cell for what seemed like hours when I started hearing the oddest clinking sound. It seemed to be coming from below. What could it possibly be? I was in the basement of the CIB facility which had a solid concrete floor. I briefly considered calling out to the guard, but immediately dismissed the idea.

The clinking continued for over an hour and gradually grew louder until a small hole appeared in the floor. I caught a glimpse of something metallic working itself around the hole. The cavity widened considerably, the clinking ceased and a small head poked out from the hole.

I recognized the creature almost immediately. My grandfather had told me all about them in my youth, but they were so rare in Nyrland that I never thought I'd lay eyes on one. The creature stared at me for a moment then opened its mouth, "You Flint?"

I nodded, "You're a Kobold."

The Kobold grunted and scowled up at me. "You think?" he asked sarcastically. "I never would have guessed. You want outta here or not?"

I nodded. He threw pickaxe at me from inside his hole and said, "If you want out you're gonna help me make a hole big enough to fit your huge ass."

The Kobold was obviously irritated and I didn't want to aggravate him further so I picked up the pickaxe. "Won't the guards be able to hear us?" I asked.

The Kobold shook his head irritably, "Humans! The guards hear what I want them to hear. Shut up and start digging or I might just decide to leave you here."

I did as the Kobold suggested and began working my way to freedom.

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Aryanna

It took me a while to find Brokk again, but when I finally did, it was not surprisingly, in a bar that catered exclusively Dvergar. The pair of burly Dwarves at the door didn't seem particularly inclined to let me in, but after I unleashed a torrent of water on the duo they gracefully allowed me inside. I strode into the establishment, ignoring the angry glances cast my way and sat down at a table across from Brokk.

"You again," the Dwarf said chugging down a large glass of amber lager. "You come to a decision?"

I nodded, "The property is yours assuming you provide me with my weapons and the information I'm seeking."

Brokk laughed. "Who you think you talkin' to? The good doctor can be found in Epegard not far from the compound you and them CIB raided. Rumor has it he's skulking 'bout an old apple distillery."

I nodded, "You know if this information proves false the deal is off."

The dwarf grunted. "Course. I ain't stupid."

"It was a pleasure doing business," I said then walked out of the bar and disappeared into the night.



Nicholas

"This is the last time I ever do a Goddess a favor," the Kobold grumbled as I slipped into the hole. I found myself in a tunnel that ran as far as I could see in either direction. It was just barely tall enough for me to fit.

I glanced down at the Vattir in surprise, "Frigg sent you?"

"Yeah, and it's been a huge pain in the ass so far," the Kobold responded. "You humans are always getting yourselves into trouble. Why I should get you out of your own mess is beyond me."

"Thanks for the help," I said. "You have a name?"

The Kobold looked up at me and spoke, "Crystal."

"You're female?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes? Is that a problem?" she asked.

I shook my head, "No, of course not."

"Come on then," she said motioning me forward. "I haven't got all day."



Aryanna

Two swirling whirlwinds appeared suddenly out from the darkness and faded away just as quickly. From within the

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swirling masses Agnes Bernauer and Elizabeth Bathory emerged. "Lizzy" was the first to approach and as usual she wore a look of contempt and loathing on her face. Agnes on the other hand, seemed genuinely pleased to see me.

"What is so important that it couldn't wait until morning?" Elizabeth growled angrily.

"I've tracked a scientist by the name of Dr. Mengele to these premises. The doctor has created a formula that purportedly will grant men the ability to use magic." I said, choosing to ignore Elizabeth's attitude.

Elizabeth looked me over suspiciously, "I would think you all of people would find that idea appealing."

I shook my head, "Mengele's experimentation has lead to the death of at least four men. I will not let anymore innocents die at the hands of that madman."

Agnes smiled, "I agree. Well done, Aryanna. I knew you showed potential."

"Thanks," I said smiling back at her. "What do you think? Should we try the direct approach or something a bit more subtle?"

Elizabeth scowled, "Direct. The sooner we get this over with the better."

Agnes nodded, "Direct."

As one we stood and marched on the abandoned apple distillery. I calmed my senses and let my magic flood through my entire body. When I got close enough to the doors, I sent a huge gust of wind at them. They buckled inward and collapsed at the hinges.

We met no resistance as we made our way through the old distillery in search of Mengele. We went from room to room and had nearly searched the entire building when we came upon a big steel door. Before I could summon my magic, Elizabeth blasted the door open and the three of us walked through the now open doorway.

Inside was the inert figure the like of which I had never seen. One half of the person's body was the figure of a man of African descent and the other was that of a beautiful woman who appeared to be of mixed African and Asian descent. I moved across the room and knelt next to the unconscious figure who was chained against the wall. I placed my hand on his female cheek and sent a trickle of spirit magic into the poor soul's body and watched as he came awake.



PART 9

Derek

I found myself looking upon the face of a Valkyrie. A pair of soft-green eyes stared down at me from a beautiful oval face that was framed by auburn hair. "Am I dead?" I asked softly.

The corner of the Angel's lips formed a very slight smile. "No," she said with a sympathetic look in her eyes. "You're in an abandoned apple distillery in Epegard."

There was something familiar about the woman, but I couldn't quite place it. "Are you a Valkyrie?"

The woman's lips curved into a full-smile. "No, my name is Aryanna Le Fey. The woman on my right is Elizabeth Bathory," she said, motioning toward a stern looking Spellbinder with gray hair. "And this is Agnes Bernauer on my left," she added motioning toward a much kinder looking middle-aged woman with salt and pepper hair.

That's why she had looked so familiar. Aryanna Le Fey was probably the most recognized Spellbinder in the world. She was the only living Seidkona known to have been born a man. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Derek," I croaked out.

"Nice to meet you Derek. I'm looking for someone named Dr. Mengele," Lady Aryanna said.

I shook my head, "I don't know where he is. He appears periodically to monitor my progress."

Lady Aryanna seemed to grimace for a moment. Then she reached over to the shackle on my right wrist. There was a brief flash of light and the shackle dissolved into amorphous goo, she did the same for the shackle on my left wrist, then the ones around my ankles. She helped me stand.

I could barely stand, due both to weakness and the mismatched length of my limbs. I felt something slide down my leg and bent over to pick it up. I realized quickly what I was holding and dropped my testicles out of sheer shock.

"Frigg and Hel," I muttered then bent over and loosed the contents of my stomach at Aryanna's feet. I nearly passed out, but somehow I managed to stay conscious.

There was a sudden chill in the room as a swirling whirlwind appeared and dissipated. "My Lady," spoke Mengele who had appeared from within the whirlwind. "Who have you brought to see us?"

Agnes Bernauer reacted almost instantly, sending a huge blast of white fire at Elizabeth Bathory. The older Spellbinder crumbled to the floor. She rounded on Lady Aryanna sending huge blasts of lightning at the younger Spellbinder. The lightning crackled around Aryanna, but seemed to have little effect. A steady stream of electrical energy poured out

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from Agnes' fingers, and I noted that a smaller shimmer of bluish light seemed to surround Lady Le Fey.

Agnes grimaced and her face changed. I watched in amazement as the Agnes' hair shifted color becoming completely white and her skin became completely black. Then her nose disappeared becoming completely flat, her face became rounder and her teeth protruded from her mouth becoming razor sharp. "How did you know?" The creature that had been Agnes Bernauer shrieked at Aryanna.

Aryanna grunted, "I didn't, but I've suspected for a long time that the de Clissons were working with someone else within the Seidskati. I always thought it was Elizabeth who was the traitor."

The creature shrieked and unleashed more lightning against Aryanna. Aryanna fell to her knees against the strain of this new onslaught and I struggled weakly to find a means to defend myself should the creature's attention turn toward me.



Nicholas

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked Crystal.

The Kobold grunted in annoyance, but otherwise ignored my question. I was just about to demand an answer from the diminutive Vattir when she stopped suddenly and pronounced, "We're here."

"We're where?" I asked in befuddlement.

The Kobold looked up and I followed her gaze. Directly above me was a small hole just barely large enough for me to fit through. "Well, don't just stand there," Crystal said irritably. "Start climbing."

Because the ceiling of the tunnel was so low I was able to reach up into the hole and pull myself up the other side. Once through I gazed back down through the cavity. "Coming?" I asked the Kobold.

She shook her head, "I did what the Goddess wanted. The rest is up to you. You might find this helpful," she said throwing up a small bundle wrapped in a cloth.

I unwrapped the cloth from the bundle and found a small .22 caliber pistol wrapped inside. "Thanks, but what would I possibly need this for?" I called down the hole, but received no answer from Crystal. I guess that meant I was on my own.



PART 10

Aryanna

"Norns preserve!" I yelled against the Dokkálfur's onslaught. Goddesses, she was powerful! All my power was being used to hold my shield and soon even that wouldn't be enough.

Just when I thought the Dark Elf would finally break through my defenses, the onslaught of lightning suddenly stopped. Ready to take advantage of the sudden reprieve I drew on my magic and prepared to go on the offensive. I quickly realized, however, that no attack would be necessary. The Dark Elf slumped to the floor, with a bullet in her head.

I whirled around and found Nicholas Flint standing behind me holding a smoking gun in his hand. "How in the world did you get here?" I asked as I stood on shaky knees.

Nicholas flashed me a cocky grin, "A little Kobold showed me the way."

I walked over to where Elizabeth lay and knelt beside her. I summoned my magic and felt for signs of life. When I found she was alive I touched her cheek and let a small trickle of magic escape my fingers. With a start the elderly Spellbinder came awake. "Agnes," she muttered.

"That wasn't Agnes," I muttered. "It was a Dark Elf Sorceress."

Elizabeth sat up suddenly and gave me a bewildered look, "Why on earth would a Dokkálfur want to take Agnes' place?"

I looked about the room at Derek, who lay in an exhausted heap on the floor. "Perhaps we should discuss this at a latter time."

Elizabeth nodded, "I owe you my life."

I shook my head, "Actually, I had very little to do with it. Nicholas arrived just in time to save both our lives."

Elizabeth glanced back at Nicholas and nodded, "Thank you."

"No problem," Nicholas said looking a bit unconformable.

Elizabeth turned back to look at me, "I'll clean things up here. I think it best if the CIB were not made aware of your involvement here."

I nodded in agreement then cast my gaze around remembering Mengele. He was nowhere to be seen. "Dammit," I muttered. "The doctor has escaped."

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Derek

I awoke in an enormous bed and looked about in confusion. Where was I? The last thing I remembered was Aryanna's battle with the Dark Elf.

"You're awake!" said a high-pitched voice excitedly. The voice belonged to a girl who looked to be in her early teen years.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The girl smiled and held out her hand, "I'm Marion Valemont. I guess you could say I'm Aryanna's adopted sister."

I took the girl's hand, "Derek Hines. I guess that means I'm in the Le Fey estates."

The girl nodded enthusiastically. "Aryanna and Mom had some really important stuff to talk about with that ornery Bathory lady, so they asked me to watch you. They should be back soon."

"Do you have any idea how I got here?" I asked the girl.

She shook her head, "Nope."

I sighed and reached across the bed to remove the blanket that lay atop me. As I did so I noted that my transformation had not continued since the last set of changes. I ran across the room and looked myself over in the mirror. Like Mengele, I was half-male and half-female. Unlike Mengele, my male side didn't look deformed.

"Sif preserve," I muttered. "Am I going to be stuck like this forever?"

Marion came over to stand next to me at the mirror. I could tell from the look she gave me that she was curious about me, but she didn't say a word. I opened my mouth to speak, but I could not think of anything to say.

I stared at the girl awkwardly and was saved from speaking as the door opened and Aryanna appeared. Almost as soon as I caught sight of her my palms started sweating and my stomach felt as if it were going to explode. Holy Hel, she was beautiful.

She smiled and I felt my knees grow weak, "Derek," she said. "How are you doing?"

I shook my head, "Fine, all things considered."

Aryanna smiled again then her attention turned to the teenager, "Marion would you please leave us?"

Marion groaned, but quickly complied.

As soon as the girl vacated the room, Aryanna's attention returned to me and she spoke, "I don't want to get your hopes up, but I think I might be able to reverse your changes."

I smiled, "That's great news!" I exclaimed practically jumping with glee, "How soon can you do it?"

Aryanna hesitated for a moment, "I don't know if it will even work. I've never done anything like it before. There's something else I want you to consider. I might be able to reverse the changes, but there's at least as good a chance that I will complete the changes."

I looked at the Spellbinder in confusion. "Why would I want to be a woman?"

Aryanna hesitated again, "While you were unconscious I probed your mind. Please, don't be angry. Let me explain." She said raising her hand as I opened my mouth to speak. I didn't particularly know what to say to that, but I didn't like the idea of her probing my mind especially with some of the thoughts I'd been having about her.

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"When I was first made Athilda's apprentice I was kidnapped and my mind was invaded," she continued. "My kidnapper intended to make me into an assassin by altering my mind. I had to be sure they hadn't tried to do the same with you. When I looked into your mind I found a strong sense of right and wrong and a strong desire for equality. I could use someone like you."

I didn't quite know what to say, "Use me for what?" I muttered awkwardly.

Again Aryanna hesitated, "Ragnarok is coming. I intend to keep it from becoming a reality."

Ragnarok? She couldn't be serious. Could she? "That's..." I muttered trailing off.

She smiled, "Crazy? I know how it sounds."

I stared at Aryanna awkwardly for several minutes. "I need to think about this," I finally managed to say.

She nodded, "Take all the time you need." She left me alone in the room and I felt as if she had taken a piece of me with her.



I was deep in thought within the same bedroom in the Le Fey estates, when a woman suddenly appeared from out of nowhere. "Norns," I muttered. "Where the Frigg did you come from?"

"Mortals," she said. "I don't know why you insist on using my name as if it were a foul curse word."

"You're the Goddess Frigg?" I muttered. "I've lost it completely. I'm seeing things."

Frigg rolled her eyes, "You're not hallucinating," she replied testily.

I hesitated for a moment then nodded.

The Goddess smiled, "Much better. What have you decided regarding Aryanna's offer?"

I shook my head. I couldn't quite explain it, but for whatever reason I became convinced I really was speaking with Frigg and not some figment of my imagination. "I don't know," I said. "If what she says is true then I would want to help stop Ragnarok. Can she really do it? Can she really finish the changes?"

Frigg smiled sadly, "Yes, but there's a good chance you could die."

I shook my head, "And Ragnarok? Can it be stopped?"

The Goddess pursed her lips, "There is a chance. The future is not set."

I hesitated for a moment then I said, "Then I suppose I'll ask her to complete the changes."

"There's no need for that," she said smiling then gently stroked my cheek.

Suddenly, a very familiar pain began to course through my body though the pain wasn't nearly as severe. This time the changes came on much more quickly. My crotch burned where my penis had remained stubbornly attached above a partial formed vagina.

I looked down where I felt the pain in my crotch and looked back up to find the Goddess gone. I quickly tore off my clothes and watched as my penis fell away from my body. I struggled against the pain and walked across the room where a mirror was mounted on the wall. I watched as the changes shifted across my face, neck, torso, and lower body.

The breast on my right side seemed to grow just a bit larger then the area around my left nipple almost seemed to inflate

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and I had two breasts. The changes to my face completed first and I was captivated by the site of it. My eyes were now slightly slanted, though my facial features were still predominantly African. There was a slight resemblance to my mother, but I was much more attractive than my mother had ever been. Strangely enough my hair had grown nearly a foot in length with the new set of changes. Gradually the changes completed across the rest of my body and the pain faded away.

The woman in the mirror had a captivating figure to match her face and I could hardly belief that it was me. There were a few features in my face that stuck out as familiar, but for the most part there was very little resemblance to my male self. I looked at my reflection and felt my stomach lurch at that the thought that I would have to live as a woman for the rest of my life. Had I really made the right choice?



After dressing myself in the set of ill-fitting clothes that Lady Aryanna had provided me I left the privacy of the room I had been given use of and went in search of the Spellbinder. I found her in the hallway conversing with a woman that had auburn hair matching her own. Aryanna caught site of me almost immediately and her eyes grew wide. "Derek? How did you..."

I locked eyes with Aryanna and felt my knees grow weak anew at the sight of her, "I...uh had a little help," I muttered awkwardly.

"Frigg," she muttered.

I don't know what made me do it. I stepped closer to her and kissed her.

Aryanna immediately broke away from me and stared at me with surprise mirrored in her eyes. "I-I'm sorry," I muttered. "I don't kn--"

Aryanna stepped back from me, "Please don't. I... just can't."

"Lady Aryanna!" A voice called from behind.

"Yes what is it, Meredith?" Aryanna replied.

The young woman bowed her head, "It is Lady Athilda. She seeks your presence."

"We will speak later," Aryanna said, giving me an awkward glance before she turned to follow Meredith down the hallway.

"Don't take it personally. She hasn't been the same since Marion's sister died," said the other woman with an encouraging smile then she too turned and left.



PART 11

Aryanna

"About time, cousin!" Claramae said with a scowl as I stepped into the room. I looked about the room and noted several more of my 'cousins' gathered around Athilda's bed within the room.

"Hold your tongue, child," Athilda said, scowling up at my cousin.

I came over and knelt by Athilda's bedside. My ancestor looked dreadful, the dark circles under her eyes were much more prevalent than usual and she looked thinner than ever. "Leave us," Athilda said. "I need to speak with Aryanna alone."

Claramae grimaced, but left the room without a word and the others followed. Mother who had appeared in the doorway, turned away and closed the door so that Athilda and I could have some privacy. "Athilda, what's going on?" I asked.

Athilda smiled sadly, "Twilight is nearly upon me, child. It is almost time."

I sighed, "Athilda don't talk like that."

Athilda grimaced up at me, "Just listen. When I pass there will be no one to guide you. You must persevere. The world depends on you."

Tears began to form at the corner of my eyes, "I don't know what I'll do without you."

Athilda smiled sagely, "I have faith in you. Of all my descendants you and your mother are the only ones I would trust with my legacy."

Tears were now streaming down my face freely, "Athilda, I cannot hope to fill your shoes."

Athilda shook her head, "Then do not fill them. Choose your own path."

I couldn't bring myself to speak. I merely nodded and gripped Athilda's hand.

"Invite the others back in. It is time to start the death watch," Athilda said quietly and more tears fell from my eyes as I went to do as she said.

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Derek

It was nearly two in the morning the next day when I got up from bed. So many thoughts were coursing through my mind I found I could not sleep. So I wandered the halls of the Le Fey estates. I found that whenever I needed to work out a problem walking seemed to help. I found that a change of scenery often led to my greatest moments of inspiration.

As I walked I thought of Aryanna. Her rejection had stung much more deeply than I would have thought. I was grateful to her for rescuing me, but I found myself inexplicably drawn to her, for reasons that seemed to go beyond the physical. Even without her present, the urge to embrace her was undiminished and I could not understand why. I know she held no obligation toward me, we had only just met, but it didn't stop me from feeling the way I did.

As I wandered through the hallways I stopped just short of a lit room whose door was open. Who could be up at this hour? Curiosity got the better of me and I poked my head inside the doorway. An old woman lay atop a bed. I knew instantly who this woman must be even though I had never seen her before. It was Athilda, the ailing Head of House Le Fey. Adjacent to the bed sprawled atop an armchair Aryanna was asleep.

"Child," a voice said suddenly and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I looked in the direction of the voice and found Athilda Le Fey staring right at me.

"You are the one Aryanna rescued. Are you not?" The old woman continued.

I nodded and stared at the Spellbinder, my mouth agape.

Athilda smiled sadly, "Come here, child. I would speak with you."

I nodded and stepped into the room quietly careful to not awaken Aryanna. Hesitatingly I stepped towards the ancient woman's bed then I knelt down beside her.

"You've chosen a difficult path," Athilda said quietly.

"Because of Ragnarok?" I asked.

Athilda nodded, "Aryanna will need all the help she can get."

I cast my eyes down to the floor, "I don't know about that," I said quietly. "Goddesses, I can't get her out of my head and she wants nothing to do with me."

Athilda laughed weakly, "Be patient with her. She will come around." There was a one final gasp from the Spellbinder then she was gone. Almost immediately, Aryanna was awake and off her seat and beside me clutching at her ancestor's lifeless body. I watched as Aryanna wept, shedding tears of my own.



It had been over a week since my rescue and I have remained in the Le Fey estates. I was at a loss for what to do or where to go. I had no way of proving my identity and no sense of purpose. Aryanna had been quiet and withdrawn since the death of her mentor. She held the only means by which I could have any sort future in her hands, but seemed to have no interest in doing anything about it. Athilda's funeral had been held just a few days before. I did not attend, but heard it was a beautiful service.

The day after Athilda's death I had discovered the gardens and had since spent nearly all my waking hours within them. There was something peaceful about the place and I found being there eased some of my pain.

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"Mind if I join you?" a voice said snapping me out of my reverie. I looked up and found Aryanna standing over me.

"No, not at all," I muttered.

"I'm sorry I haven't been a very welcoming host. I've all but ignored you since Athilda's death and I feel terrible about it," she said after sitting down on the bench beside me.

I shook my head, "That's okay, you've lost someone you care about. I understand."

"That's no excuse. I can't let my personal life get in the way of my duties now that I'm the Head of House Le Fey," she said, grimacing a bit.

I nodded but didn't otherwise respond. "You're likely wondering about your future," Aryanna said quietly. "I'd like to take you on as my apprentice if you're willing."

I looked her in the eyes and felt my heart melt at the sight of her. "I... I don't know if that's such a good idea," I muttered. "Ever since I first laid eyes on you I've wanted nothing so much as to be with you, but—"

Aryanna cut me short as she drew close and kissed me full on the lips. "I have something to confess," she said as we broke for air. "I overheard you speaking with Athilda the night she died. I've been torn with guilt ever since. Ever since I laid on you I've felt a connection, but until you kissed me I didn't understand it. I was in denial."

"Goddesses," I muttered. "No wonder you've been so withdrawn."

"So..." she muttered, "Will you accept my offer?"

I bit my lip then kissed her deeply on the lips. "Only if we can be together."

A smile touched Aryanna's lips and I knew everything would turn out just fine.

❖ TO BE CONCLUDED ❖

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