

Welcome to 616!

Not the movies, not the cartoons,
not an imaginary story!



A Marvel Comics
fanfiction zine



CAPTAIN MARVEL!

Avengers!

hawkeye!

Journey into Mystery!



Loki, America Chavez (Miss America) and Tommy Shepherd (Speed) by Dorodraws



Kate Bishop (Hawkeye), Billy Kaplan (Wiccan) and Teddy Altman (Hulking) by Dorodraws

Welcome to 616! - A Marvel Comics fanfiction zine

Table of Contents

Young Avengers by Dorodraws – Young Avengers (Art)

Featuring (deaged, reincarnated) Loki, America Chavez (Miss America), Tommy Shepherd (Speed), Kate Bishop (Hawkeye), Billy Kaplan (Wiccan) and Teddy Altman (Hulking)

Here in the Clouds by Brandnewfashion - Captain Marvel

Featuring Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel)/Peter Parker (Spider-man)

Something With Wings by Elspethdixon – Avengers

Featuring Jan van Dyne (The Wasp)/Hank Pym (Ant-man)

Smash by ScaryKrystal – Captain Marvel, She-Hulk (Art)

Featuring Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) & Jen Walters (She-Hulk)

Afternoon Stroll by Neveralarch – Hawkeye

Featuring Clint Barton (Hawkeye) & Kate Bishop (Hawkeye)

By Hands and Heels by Lunik – Journey into Mystery

Featuring Leah, (deaged, reincarnated) Loki & Thori the Hellhound

El Cheapo Press

Grey Bard, Editor in Chief and Proprietor

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Here In The Clouds by Brandnewfashion

“What are you doing up here?”

Carol didn’t have to look over to see who the newcomer was. “Hi, Peter,” she greeted.

Said web-slinger slipped off his mask before sitting down next to the blonde. “So.”

“So?” Carol’s lips curved upwards into a smile.

Peter chuckled. “Are we really doing this again?”

She shook her head. “I was just up here thinking.”

He nodded and they both looked out at the sight before them: New York always looked better at night. Manhattan was constantly bustling with activity, but Queens never failed to provide a level of comfort to Peter: it was, after all, where he grew up. From the top of the abandoned warehouse that they were sitting on, they had a clear view of the Manhattan skyline, but the noises of the city were too far to be heard.

Carol’s voice broke through his reverie. “What about you?”

“I always come up here to think,” he replied with a shrug. “Been coming up here for years.”

“I can see why; it’s beautiful,” the blonde observed. “You’re from around here, right?”

“Yep. My aunt and uncle’s old house is a couple of blocks down.” He gestured to behind him. “I come here every night. Good place to get away from all the madness.”

“Did you just stop a car-thief or something?” Carol asked, noticing a slight tear in the arm of his costume.

“Bank robber.” He looked down at his arm and finally noticed the rip himself. “Aw, man. I just stitched this up last night!”

“You do your own sewing?”

He looked at her, perplexed. “Doesn’t everyone?”

Carol merely shrugged: there was no way that she was going to let him know about her lack of domestic skills.

“Why’re *you* still in costume?” asked Peter.

“No reason,” she told him. “There haven’t been any alien invasions or anything lately, so it’s been pretty quiet. I was just out flying.”

They remained in companionable silence as they continued to look out over the water.

“Hey, why aren’t you ‘Colonel Marvel?’” Peter asked out of the blue.

Carol looked at him incredulously. “You *do* realize how absolutely ridiculous that sounds, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess, but you’re also talking to the guy who named himself ‘Spider-Man’ when he was fifteen,” Peter pointed out, “so I’m not exactly the ambassador for superhero names... *But*, I do know that you’ve had your fair share of name changes, so why this one?”

“Cap insisted.”

“You still didn’t have to take it.”

“Yeah, but... This at least gives me something to work for.”

“What?”

Carol chuckled at Peter’s puzzled expression. “What I’m saying is: there are so many extraordinary people that have taken the name, and they’ve all done a lot of good with it.” She paused a moment, debating on whether to continue telling him. “I know that I’m probably never going to be able to live up to the legacy, and honestly, sometimes I wonder if I’m worthy enough to have taken the mantle at all,” she looked down at her hands, “but now, I know that I’m constantly going to push myself so I don’t let any of them down.”

“You don’t—” Peter cleared his throat, “You don’t have to live up to anything, y’know. You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Carol, you’re already an amazing hero. You—”

“I... I almost let a little girl die today.” Her voice was so inaudible, Peter almost didn’t hear her.

He tentatively reached out and covered her hand with his. “Carol...”

“I got too confident,” she continued. “I... If Iron Man hadn’t shown up...” she broke off. “I don’t even want to know what would’ve happened.”

“But she’s okay, now.”

“I know, and I know that I should be thankful for that,” Carol replied. “But I should’ve been able to handle something as simple as that on my own. I’m grateful for the rest of you, don’t get me wrong, but I won’t ever be able to make a name for myself if I keep making stupid mistakes like that.”

Peter had never seen her so vulnerable and open before. He had always known her to have a commandeering presence (something he attributed to being in the military). He had never heard her speak so negatively about herself, and frankly, it was more than a little concerning.

She took a deep breath before continuing, “With the Avengers, I was known as ‘Captain America’s *secretary*.’ And now that I’ve tried making a new name for myself, I feel like I’m under constant scrutiny. It’s like everyone’s just waiting for me to mess up... It’s like—”

“Like they’re waiting for you to fail,” Peter said quietly.

Surprised, she turned to look at the brunette. “I’m sorry, Peter. I’m being callous again.”

He waved it off. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not,” she said with a frown. “I’m complaining about my life to someone who probably has more significant problems.”

“Really, it’s fine,” Peter assured. “I’ve been doing this superhero thing for half my life. I’ve learned to deal with it.”

Carol was a little bothered by her companion’s nonchalance. Sure, she had always been aware of Peter’s jokes and sarcasm, but she (as well as others) have learned to not take him too seriously. However, she didn’t realize until then that maybe it was more of a defense mechanism than a cry for attention.

“How?”

Peter looked at her curiously. “How do I what?”

How was he able to deal with all of the negative attention that he got as Spider-Man? How could he just shrug it all off and make jokes about it? “How do you do it?” she clarified.

Peter thought for a few moments before responding. “I guess... I guess after being in this business for so long, I’ve realized there are more important things to worry about than my reputation. I hate calling myself a ‘superhero’ because I honestly don’t believe that I *am* one: I just try to be the best ‘Spider-Man’ that I can be.”

Of course, Carol had already known that... Or she’d at least heard others say more-or-less the same thing. But the difference between then and every other time she had heard those words was that she never had an actual legacy to uphold.

Then again, she did this to herself. She knew from the start that taking the name would entail a number of other responsibilities, but—

“But for the record,” Peter said, interrupting her thoughts. He looked thoughtful. “*You* make a great superhero.”

Carol actually *blushed* at that (she hoped the red of her costume didn’t bring it out that much). “I-I really don’t...”

“Don’t be so modest. Everyone knows ‘Carol Danvers.’”

“Yeah, as an alcoholic that was kicked off the Avengers.”

“Everyone goes through difficult times,” Peter said, simply. “No one thinks any less of you.”

She looked at him empathetically. “Y’know, maybe you should start taking your own advice.”

Peter looked at her skeptically. “There’s a difference between you and me—”

“And I already told you that none of that matters,” Carol interjected.

“You’re just as much a ‘superhero’ as everyone else. You’re just as much an Avenger as everyone else. Other than Cap and Logan, there really aren’t

that many others that have been doing this as long as you,” she pointed out.

Peter shrugged. “So what if I had my powers longer?”

Carol shook her head. “I’m not just talking about powers,” she clarified. “The team has nothing but the utmost respect for you, Peter. Steve trusts you—”

“Doesn’t he think I’m a spaz?”

“Being a spaz has nothing to do with trust,” Carol said affectionately.

“So I *am* a spaz,” he said deadpan.

“Anyway” she continued, ignoring him, “Tony would probably go crazy if he didn’t have someone there to talk all of that science stuff with. And as much as Logan denies it, I know he likes having you around.”

“What about you?” Peter inquired.

“What about me?”

“What do *you* think of me?” he pressed.

She smiled. “I like you here in the clouds with us.”

Peter remembered the first time she had told him that. Unfortunately, a major battle was taking place simultaneously, so he never had the time to dwell on it.

He took a deep breath. “Please don’t punch me in the face for doing this.”

Before Carol could question him, Peter leaned in and kissed her. It was an innocent kiss, really—soft and sweet—but when Peter pulled away, she decided that it was over way too fast.

“Um...” She blinked. “Uh...” Why couldn’t she think of anything intelligent to say?

Peter rubbed the back of his neck and laughed nervously. “Ah, sorry...”

Carol shook her head. “Don’t be.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments before Peter spoke again. “So...”

“So?”

“Is this... weird?” He gestured to her and then himself.

“Not really...?” She honestly didn’t know what to think of it.

“I kind of wanna kiss you again,” he stated.

“Kind of?” she repeated.

“I want to,” Peter clarified, “but I don’t know if you’ll end up vaporizing me or something... worse.”

She smirked. “Why don’t you find out, Parker?”

He moved closer. “This is... probably a bad idea.” He slowly backed away.

Carol visibly deflated and looked away. “I should get going anyway,” she announced. However, she made no move to get up.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Peter defended.

She turned back to face him and arched an eyebrow. “Then what—?”

Peter nervously scrubbed his hand through his hair. “I—I uh, it’s, um...

still kind of early... and I don’t know about you, but I’m starving...”

“Peter Parker, are you asking me on a date?” Carol asked.

He nodded. “Well, I figured since our last one was interrupted, we could give it another shot.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.”

“Also, I know that you’ve been waiting for me to ask,” Peter said off-handedly. “Although I have no idea why you didn’t just call me. This tactic seems to be a little over-the-top, even for you.”

Carol’s eyes widened comically, which made Peter double over in laughter. She turned away from him (she mainly did it to look indignant, but hiding her blush from Peter was also a plus). “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, you don’t.” Peter leaned in closer. “Why would you be sitting on the roof of an abandoned warehouse in Queens if you weren’t waiting for me?”

She turned her head to face him again, and realized that his face was only inches away from hers. “What if I was waiting for another spider-powered superhero?”

“Do I have competition? Is there another nerdy, awkward, science geek that I should be worried about?”

“He’s more of a dork than a geek.”

Peter looked at her pointedly. “Is he now?”

“Yes, but I do admit that he *is* rather intelligent.”

“Always an important trait,” he approved.

“He’s really dedicated to his work.”

Peter nodded in agreement. “I like a good work ethic.”

“And he cares about everyone around him.”

“Sounds like a swell guy.”

“Oh, he really is.”

“Is he attractive?” Peter inquired.

“He’s all right,” she answered with a shrug. She laughed when Peter scowled.

Peter stood up and scanned their surroundings. “Well, since it doesn’t look like this guy is going to show up tonight,” he held his hand out towards the blonde, “would you be interested in grabbing a bite to eat with me?”

“I’d love to,” she replied, taking his hand and getting up.

Peter then moved to stand next to her before wrapping his arm around her waist.

“Uh, Peter, what are you doing?” she asked, not that she was complaining about the contact.

“Did you really expect us to walk all the way downtown?”

“I can fly, you know,” she stated.

“Yeah, I know,” Peter replied, “but this time, *you’re* the girl on the date.”

“Oh?” Carol teased. She slipped her arm around his waist as well. “So I don’t have to pay this time, huh?”

“Nope.” Peter grinned at her. “But I hope you’re ready to put out.”

Without warning, Peter jumped off the building and swung them through the streets of the quiet neighborhood, the sound of Carol’s melodic laughter trailing after them.



Something With Wings by Elspethdixon

Hank has loved only two women in his entire life.

Maria kissed *him*, the first time, the two of them alone in her father’s lab. Hank had been twenty-four, still working on his Phd, and girls – women – had been a thing more mysterious to him than any scientific puzzle. Organic chemistry and particle physics and entomology could all be learned. Maria’s inexplicable decision that he was interesting, “cute,” and that time spent making out with him in the chemistry lab was time well-spent couldn’t be explained by any amount of logic.

He asked her to marry him the day after he defended his dissertation, two months after that first kiss.

She and her father were killed just weeks after the wedding. Hank told himself that he’d never love anyone again.

Hank had been twenty-five when Jan Van Dyne had blown into his new lab like a whirlwind, shopping bags dangling from her elbow and heels twice as high as any Maria had ever worn still not making her tall enough to look Hank in the eye.

She looked so much like Maria – the same dark eyes, the same glossy brown hair, the same elfin face – that it hurt just to look at her. He avoided her for an entire month, making sure to stay away from the lab every time Van Dyne mentioned that his “little girl” would be coming. Apparently, that made him “mysterious” and “a challenge.”

Sometimes, though, she dropped in without warning, and Hank kept his eyes determinedly on his work, offering monosyllabic answers when she asked silly questions. Maria had worked with her father in his labs since she’d been a teenager, understood exactly what Hank had been trying to do with mass and dimensional physics and human body chemistry.

She’d been quiet, soft-spoken, her Eastern European accent making her words sound more serious than they really were. Jan was never quiet. She was like a butterfly, fluttering all over the lab, *touching* things, wearing ridiculous clothing that completely violated every safety rule known to man – open-toed shoes, short skirts, long, dangly jewelry.

When the lab was attacked, and Van Dyne was kidnapped, flighty, butterfly Janet came and found Hank where he’d been kneeling in the wreckage, sorting through the shattered glassware on the floor in search of a test tube or flask that was still usable. Her strappy gold stiletto heels with the ankle straps crunched firmly over broken glass.

Hank stood automatically – from his spot on the floor, he’d been able to see right up her short skirt.

“You’re going to help me,” she said, the words not a question. She picked up his ant-man helmet and handed it to him. “I want powers, too. I’m going to find my father.”

The physical alterations took much better on Jan than they ever had on Hank – wings were sex-linked, in some ants, but it was more than that. She’d been meant to fly.

Not a butterfly, though. He’d been wrong about that. She picked her own name, unintentionally matching his – the nearly five hundred wasp species in the vespidae family were members of the superfamily Vespoidea, closely related to formicidae – and more than lived up to it.

It was more her name than Ant-Man or Giant-Man or Goliath were ever his, and when he started calling himself Yellowjacket, it fit better than any of the others, not just because it was a name that summed up the nastier, less controlled parts of him, but because it was a deliberate match for Jan’s. Ant-Man and Goliath weren’t good enough for bright, wealthy, care-free Jan Van Dyne – there was a part of Ant-Man that would always be Maria’s, and giving up the name banished her ghost alongside the twisted record of past failures -- but Yellowjacket could match the Wasp.

It was the first deliberately romantic thing Hank ever did, so of course, it backfired horribly. Marrying Maria had ended in tragedy. Marrying Jan ended in disaster, and again, it was Hank’s fault.

He tried lots of romantic things after that – weekends in Vegas, flowers, naming a newly discovered species of aphid found in the nests of a member of the Myrmicinae family after her – but none of them seemed to work properly. He didn’t even tell her about the aphids, after Tigra laughed at him and told him that no girl on the planet would appreciate having her ex-husband name a bug after her.

“They have a symbiotic relationship with the ants who raise them,” he’d tried to explain. “The colony can’t survive without them.”

Tigra had made a face, her whiskers pulling back in disgust. “That’s really

gross, and also way too needy. Send her a birthday card or something. Or you could try moving on.”

Tony didn't think it was stupid, but he'd named a kind of computer circuit after Indries Moomji, and, later, a particular software algorithm after Rumiko Fujikawa, so he wasn't exactly an unbiased source (he claimed the Fujikawa algorithm was so-called because it had been developed in consort with programmers at Fujikawa Industries, and that naming it after the other company was a gesture in honor of the Stark-Fujikawa merger). Plus, he wallpapered his house with pictures of Steve Rogers, which was significantly more obvious than Hank's single picture of Jan that he kept on his nightstand. He had no pictures of Maria.

Then the sky fell, and Wanda Maximoff was possessed by Mephisto (or maybe Chthon, or maybe Immortus had brainwashed her – Hank had never been clear on the details, afterward) and then the skrull had come.

After that, there as no more need for romance, whether it worked or not.

He'd loved Maria for a year. He'd loved Jan for most of his adult life, with everything that was in him, even the crazy, broken parts. There would never be anyone else after her.

The last romantic gesture Hank made was another name change. He'd lost Maria's ghost when he'd stopped being Ant-Man. He was going to keep Jan's with him forever.

When she came back, appearing out of the same swirl of Chaos that restored lost Tony's memories and rebuilt the Vision out of nothing, Hank was afraid to move. Afraid it was another hallucination, like the ones he'd seen the last time he'd stopped taking his medication, when he'd wanted, needed to keep from sleeping, to keep working, fighting, and couldn't afford to be slowed down by chemicals that didn't always work to begin with.

Clint had belted him across the face when he'd realized what Hank had been doing. Had taken the broken glass from the shattered Erlenmeyer flask away and bandaged Hank's wrist up and held Hank still with arms that were much stronger than Hank had ever suspected while Hank screamed at him.

Clint had gotten Bobbi back. Clint had *come* back. He didn't understand, it wasn't fair, it should have been Jan who came back. Or Hank who died. Or Tony. Or Clint, again. Anyone but Jan.

No one had looked Hank in the eye for a week after that. Only Tony, who didn't remember why Hank ought to have hated him, who couldn't remember losing his own loved ones, who was broken inside in some way so profound that looking into his eyes was like speaking to a stranger.

Now, Tony was crying on the floor, a ball in Steve's arms, choking out incomprehensible sounds that might have been apologies, and the Vision was cradling Wanda's motionless form in his arms, red lighting from her fading powers still crackling over his body – she'd never be an omega

mutant again, after today, Hank suspected, had probably burned half her powers out with what she'd done to repair the world – and Jan was standing there, still wearing the Wasp costume she'd died in, untouched and perfect. She was holding a slot machine token in one hand.

When she saw his costume, she laughed.

“What have you been *doing*?” she demanded. “And why are you wearing my clothes?”

Hank just stared, his mind blank. There was a reason, a hundred reasons, but just now, no words would come to him. “To remember you,” he managed.

Jan shook her head, slowly. “That's either the most disturbing thing I've ever seen, or the most romantic.”

Then she was hugging him, and Hank's knees gave way, and he buried his face in her neck and the smell of her hair.

“Next time,” she said, while her hands dug into his back hard enough to hurt, “just name some species of bug after me. Something with wings.”



Smash by ScaryKrystal

Jen Walters (She-Hulk) and Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel)



Afternoon Stroll by Neveralarch

Right, so I'm taking the dog out for a walk. The most normal thing I could possibly do. Admittedly the dog is limping, because he's still only half-recovered from getting hit by a car. And I'm limping, because I'm always recovering from something. This week HYDRA kicked the shit out of me and broke my nose, so I've got a nice nasal voice thing to go with the limp.

Kate's doing fine, walking slow so us invalids can keep up. Have you noticed that Kate never really gets beat up like me or the dog? Another way that she's just better than us.

"Nice out today," says Kate, because this is the kind of thing you say when it's gorgeous sunny fall day out and you're walking the dog and everything is totally normal. I say something about the clouds and the wind, I don't know.

My ankle really hurts. Did I mention that I sprained my ankle fighting space pirates? I don't even understand how this stuff happens to me.

Lucky stops walking and starts sniffing around for a place to take a dump. I fish a plastic bag out of my pocket while Kate stands around and pretends that she's not watching a dog poop.

If you know anything about me at all, it will not surprise you that this is when the biker gang attacks.

They're zipping around the park way too fast and tearing up the grass. They're dressed in grey robes, and none of them are wearing helmets, but they've all got long beards and bald heads. And sunglasses. And sickles.

I'm thinking druid biker cult, which sounds like a mad-lib.

Lucky starts freaking out when one of the bikes gets too close - he's still nervous around engines, which, seriously, I understand. But I'm holding on to his leash, so when he runs he drags me along and I am not as graceful as usual due to the sprained ankle, pretty sure I mentioned that. I'm fumbling for my throwing knife, because I didn't carry a bow to walk my dog but I don't go outside unarmed because I'm not totally stupid. One of the druids gets close enough to slash at me, and he misses but my knife goes right in his arm and he drops the sickle. His sunglasses fall off too, which is pretty hilarious.

And then Lucky jumps out of the way of another bike and the jerk on the leash knocks me over.

One of the druids, the lead guy, maybe, because his beard is freaking enormous, starts bearing down on me. He's not even going to bother with the sickle. He's just going to run me over.

"Hey," says Kate, and the druid looks over.

The arrow hits his shoulder and knocks him off the bike, and it skids away from me. Kate nocks another arrow and lets fly, and another, zip zip zip, no more druids on motorcycles.

Collapsible bow, natch, plus a quiver attached to her leg, hidden under her coat. Have I mentioned that Kate is perfect?

The druids start groaning and trying to stop the bleeding, and Kate walks over to give me a hand up.

"What did you do to them?" she asks.

"Dunno," I say. "I don't know anything about these guys. We need a druid expert."

Some of the less wounded druids are already moving around. Kate points at her quiver, only four arrows left. Right, time to get a move on. I start hobbling away with dog in tow.

"What about Doctor Druid?" asks Kate, looking over her shoulder in case any of the biker guys decide to follow.

"Pretty sure he's dead."

"No, he's back now." Kate turns and fires an arrow, a man screams, and then we're around the corner and they can't see us anymore.

"Really?" I say. "I should send a card."

"What, a 'glad you're not dead anymore' card?"

"I bought a pack of twenty a couple years ago, figured they'd be useful. I think I've got three or four left."

"You Avengers are weird," says Kate, and pulls me into an alley. We wait a few minutes, and then watch as the druid gang goes running by in hot pursuit.

"Look," I say. "Forget Doctor Druid. Let's just call the cops and go home."

"Sounds good," says Kate and pulls out her cell.

Turns out she's got the police on speed dial, *and* she actually knows the address of this random alley. What can I say? She's perfect.

JOURNEY INTO MYSTERY®

By Hands and Heels by Lunik

There were a number of possible outcomes, Loki knew, when the Allmother summoned him away from his "studies". Fewer than that number, when they summoned him to attend them in the ruingarden, and when they summoned him in a message for no eyes but his own Loki was forced to admit that the possibilities had dwindled to "trouble". Truly, it was a hardship to be Asgardia's least favourite, most useful son.

Still, as he was called, so he went and they lapped the garden twice before getting to the point. Loki could appreciate the mothers' need to pretend that there were other things to discuss and he was patient. But he could only answer so many questions about his made up interests and it gave him some solid ground to stand on when they started to speak of tasks Asgardia needed done.

"Your pardon queen," he said, trailing along by Freyja's side. "I thought the contents of Odin's treasure room must have been lost when Asgard fell from the sky?"

"You'd be surprised," she said. "We have located many of the more dangerous elements and returned them to safe keeping. The Allfather's collection should not be loosed on an unsuspecting world."

It was a nice spin to place on stockpiling weapons. Loki was impressed. "But you were too late to safely keep this one," he mused.

Freyja's smile was a touch warmer than it was sharp. "It was found by a smith near the roots of the world tree. Before we became aware that he had it, it had already been... lost."

"And if you ever needed an indictment against gambling," Gaea put in, "then this is it."

"I don't know," Loki said. "The wager seems to have worked out well for its victor." But unfortunately the victor was not of Asgardia, and the Allmother had no pressure they could exert on him to retrieve his winnings. "So, this Warlock's Eye. It must be a powerful artefact, then?"

"What power it had is gone," Freyja assured him. "The icon itself is mostly that. A trophy, but one that belonged to Odin; and for that reason if no other, we would see it returned. Asgardia can afford little embarrassment in these times."

Loki smiled. What embarrassment was there in losing your own king's treasures and then having them gambled away by a drunken bellows-hand? He pretended he believed Freyja that the icon held no power, and Freyja pretended she believed that he believed her, and they all stood in a rosy little cloud of trustfulness. "So where might an enterprising young trickster find this gambler?" he asked.

Freyja beamed. "I knew we could rely on you, Loki dearest." She blithely pulled a rose down from the bower by her head and tucked it behind Loki's ear. Loki gracelessly submitted to the brief affection. Freyja handed out roses like a true mother would have given love. So inconvenient as it may be, he accepted the flower, and he waited until he was out of her sight before trying to extract it.

The thorns always poked holes in his cowl.

==

"You've brought a rose?"

Leah was sitting with her hands in her lap on a rock on the ground. Loki, traipsing down the stone steps of her cave, glanced at the flower in his hand. He had to quell the urge to deny having it, and chided himself for a useless lie. If he was to lie to Leah, it would be a lie worth telling. "It's for you!" he said cheerfully. "Happy four-month-iversary, for living in a hole in the ground!"

Well, that didn't have to be a lie. Leah stood up with a unimpressed look. "When you visit with the Allmother of Asgard, one of them always gives you a rose. It's as if they don't understand circumspection. Where are we going, then?"

"On a mission most secret!" Loki held the rose out for her, then placed it decoratively on a rock shelf when she ignored it.

Thori trotted out from behind the stalagmites in the corner. It looked like he'd ruined another leather collar by setting it on fire. Loki wasn't going to replace this one. "murder?" asked the hellpuppy hopefully.

"Perhaps," Loki said. "But only if you're very well behaved." Thori immediately lost interest. "Pack your keepsakes and belongings, Leah, for you and I have been commissioned by powers most high."

"By 'commissioned' do you mean 'blackmailed'?" asked Leah. She wasn't packing her belongings, but that was because nothing belonged to her.

"Well, yes," Loki admitted, "but the Allmothers were kind enough to keep the threats in the sub textual arena, and so I am free to pretend that I take this journey of my own free volition."

"This level of self deception is nothing to be proud of, Loki."

"It is for the god of lies, Leah!" Loki sang. Kneeling, he scabbled under a rock with a hole in it where they kept Thori's leash. And the last of his spare collars, which after a brief wrestling session and a muffled *devour your Descendents!* he managed to clip around the puppy's neck. Leah sat at one

side and looked like she wasn't planning to help at all. Loki knew she was just waiting for the moment to jump to his side and aid him. She was good like that. He tightened the fastening and wiped hellpuppy slobber from his face. "Come, then. You can never again say that I don't take you anywhere nice."

"Nicer than this dirty great hole in the ground?" asked Leah as she followed him up to the surface. "Loki, you spoil me."

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"I thought you said these people were nomads."

Loki tilted his head to one side, better to gaze up at the fortress wall in front of them. Twenty feet tall, and built out of tree trunks that stabbed into the autumn-blue sky. The land for miles around was empty grass and empty forest, and hostile as you might expect from a bubble realm attached to the unreal branches of a tree built of thought. Loki and Leah had come looking for scavengers and sorcerers who carved their lives out in half-realms and places that never became quite real. As they had travelled, Ikol had spoken in his ear about the people he had come to see until he had begun to expect wanderers living in dirt holes. Instead he found a bastion, in defiance of nature. "Perhaps they're the kind of nomads who live in castles?" he suggested. He brightened. "Like hermit crabs!"

Leah didn't really have to make any reply to that. Loki blithely ignored the reply she didn't make and waved to the sentries at the top of the wall. "Hello up there!"

A man and a woman manned the sentry box, dressed in armour that was possibly made from leather, possibly dirty cloth. They didn't smile, but their weapons weren't exactly drawn either, and that was a warmer welcome than Loki got some of the places he went. "State your business, travellers."

Loki held his hands in front of himself and did his best to look wretched. "We seek sanctuary," he said. "My companion and I - and our pets - have been too long on the road, and now we find ourselves without shelter in the wilderness. Your walls are tall, and strong. And they looked so very..." Heavy, intimidating, impregnable... "welcoming."

"Your pets?" The woman's mouth twisted in obvious distaste. "That creature..." Down at Loki's heel, Thori huffed a little lick of flame and the woman above visibly recoiled. "That thing is your pet?"

Thori growled. "death to All mud-rutting bastards." Loki smiled brightly. "He's a sweetheart."

Ah *now* they were reaching for their weapons. "We do not permit hell beasts inside our walls!"

"And nor do we permit strangers inside," her partner said. "The forests are filled with things that crawl. We have no guarantee that they do not house things that walk like men."

"We're not hell beasts!" Loki protested. Leah cleared her throat. "But

further than that, there's a man we're looking for." Somewhere inside these walls was a wanderer among nomads; a sorcerer and a stonewright, the Allmother had said, who supplemented his income with gambling. He had a reputation in the low streets of Asgardia as a quick wit who would gamble with his employers for his own wages - double or nothing, and he didn't lose that bet nearly as often as an honest man would. Before meeting him, Loki found he liked the man immensely. "Svadilfari. Is he here?"

That got a genuine reaction from the two of them, the kind that made Loki wish he had opened with Svadilfari's name. The thunderclouds in the man's expression cleared in an instant smile, though the woman's mouth tightened with suspicion. "What business could two young vagrants have with Svadilfari?"

Even as she spoke, another man appeared in the sentry box, stepping out into view as though he hadn't been hiding there all along. Tall and dark, with a mane of black hair, he was dressed sparingly and smiling widely. Loki couldn't tell immediately how dangerous that smile was. He clapped the woman companionably on the back. "A cat can look at a king," he admonished her. "Let them ask for who they will." He leaned with both elbows on the sill of the box window. "We've been expecting you my young fr--"

As soon as his eyes met Loki's he stopped. A ghost of surprise haunted that smile, and he straightened. And Ikol stirred on Loki's shoulder. "Svadilfari," the bird said. Loki had never seen the man before. "Loki, here is your quarry."

"Well well," said Svadilfari more quietly. "The Allmother does honour me."

Allmother. Loki knew it had been a lot to hope for that Svadilfari would be unprepared for Asgardia to come calling, but he had been hoping that he wouldn't be found out as Asgardian before he drew breath. He felt an imaginary draft, the kind that would be caused by a dozen doors swinging closed against him. Up above, Svadilfari nudged his companions.

"That's no wandering vagrant," he said. "That there is Loki of Asgard."

The guards' eyes focused on him again, the sharp focus that Loki was intimately acquainted with by now and exactly the focus he'd been hoping to avoid. Thanks, Svadilfari.

"Hail, below!" the sorcerer called. "Loki, you look different. New haircut?"

"Look again," Loki suggested, and Svadilfari snapped his fingers.

"I've got it! You've cast off your adult body to take the form of a child." He frowned. "Wait, that's not it. Are you wearing lifts?"

Despite himself, Loki laughed. "That's it," he said. "You've seen right through me."

"Yes, I have," said Svadilfari genially. "And may you never forget, Loki, that I always will." He turned to the guards. "Open the gates up, I'll vouch

for them both. And their... their dog, too. Loki and I share a history."

Loki looked to Ikol, who sat silent on his shoulder. Well. This was either a good sign or a bad one. Leah leaned in to whisper, "Do you?"

"Of course," Loki muttered and raised his voice for the sentries, "Of course we do! I have it every Tuesday and Thursday!"

The sorcerer Svadilfari laughed. "You, Loki, have changed not nearly so much as people say." He disappeared below the wall without another word, and a second later the door at the base swung open. Leah looked at the open doorway, and at Loki, *we're not genuinely going to trust this, are we?* Loki shrugged expressively. Angels may fear to rush in, but he was Loki. What worked, worked.

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Inside the city walls was a sprawl Loki could more easily believe was nomadic. The walls may have been high and fortified but past them was an expanse of cropped grass and a hundred or more tents dotted around it. Some were small enough to house one person at night, provided they didn't roll over in their sleep; others the size of Broxton's town hall and held up by networks of tall stakes and ropes. There were dirt paths in between the tents, worn into the grass by the passage of feet, but they weren't roads. The whole place had a sense of transience about it. Not a city, but a camp.

As soon as they were in the gates, Ikol took for the skies to follow them from above. If Loki suspected that that had something to do with their guide, he wasn't afforded the opportunity to ask. He couldn't see any immediate reason to be distrustful of Svadilfari. The man had a way about him, a big warm friendliness that made it hard to dislike him. Obviously his past self had managed, but Loki responded to his congeniality in every way save the important ones. Svadilfari led them to the most permanent-looking structure in the place, a wooden watchtower, and they climbed to the top so he could show them his city. Brag about it, really. He pointed out the hunters' tent, the artisans' row, the massive fire pit at the centre of the walls around which the rest of the encampment was arranged. Loki paid as much attention as he felt like, but one thing caught his eye. The grass inside the walls was a uniform length, cropped short, but--

"No animals," he muttered. "You don't even have any horses?"

Svadilfari shrugged. "We carry our own burdens, when we move." Loki glanced out at the acres of tanned hide and canvas, not to mention the oaken poles. Heavy burden. And he couldn't help but notice the wagons and their empty harnesses. "But you ought to remember that, Loki."

Yes there was also that. Loki's shared history with Svadilfari got him inside, so he wasn't yet ready to admit he didn't remember any of it. Svadilfari leaned back against the railing that surrounded the watchtower, and observed him.

"You certainly have changed."

"As have you?" Loki said uncertainly.

There was that smile again, the possibly dangerous one. "You were a little taller when we last met." Svadilfari laid a hand on his shoulder. "And don't worry, I don't intend to let our history encroach on our future. I hear you've put every part of your past behind you, so why should I not? You're my guest here, regardless of what happened."

"That's certainly a relief."

"Are you going to stop pretending you don't recognise me any time soon?"

Loki could have kissed him for providing the perfect escape route from awkwardness. He grinned widely. "I hadn't planned to. Who are you again?"

Svadilfari made a noise halfway between disappointment and amusement. Standing by the tower structure, Leah interrupted. "I'd like to know that. How do you know Loki?"

Loki looked to Svadilfari, but he shook his head. "Loki can tell you that story later."

"Loki can't be expected to remember every part of his long and storied history," Loki protested. "Today is neither Tuesday nor Thursday."

"Then Loki can wait until Tuesday and tell you," said Svadilfari. He stepped to the centre of the tower, behind Leah, and gave a tug to a sheaf of canvas. It fell to the floorboards with a slithering sound. "Here, I have something to show you." Whichever god it had been that had closed a door to Loki opened a window, and he turned around to find himself a foot away from the Warlock's Eye. It was carved out of stone, in the shape of an ornate and gilded eye. The centre of it was a ball of something that couldn't possibly be glass, the way it shone where it didn't catch the sun. Loki could feel static rolling off it. Of course, it was little more than a trophy these days, but he could see why the Allmother might want it returned and out of the reach of Asgardia's enemies.

"We're quite proud of it," Svadilfari said, and he did look proud. Smug, even.

"Where did it come from?" asked Loki, and Svadilfari gave him a sardonic look.

"Loki. Five days ago I made a fool of Asgard, and today I find Asgard's trickster on my doorstep? Don't ask me to believe in coincidence. I don't." His hand stroked the gold and stone of the Eye, like he didn't feel the sparks of power in it. It was a very significant paperweight to him. Loki wondered what kind of a sorcerer he was, even as he felt his precious window of opportunity squeezing shut. "You're not here to take in the scenery."

Loki widened his eyes in perfectly convincing surprise. "It's from *Asgard*, you say? What a co--"

"Stop that." The window slammed shut on his fingers.

"Fine," Loki scowled. "Perhaps I forgot to mention that I was in the employ of Asgardia."

"You did." Svadilfari nodded. "Congratulations, by the way, on getting back in with them."

"Thank you, it wasn't easy to do!" In the corner of his eye, Leah was looking to the heavens. Loki cleared his throat. "But--"

"You're welcome," Svadilfari cut over him. "And you can stay as long as you like, the both of you - let it never be said that Asgard has found us unwelcoming - but you're leaving empty handed." With finality, he went to the ladder leading back to the ground. "I know you, Loki. So I've got my eye on you." With a click that Loki swore he could hear, the window locked. Svadilfari vaulted down the ladder three rungs at a time, like a pirate in the riggings and Loki had to wonder if he could do anything without being quite that dashing. He pressed his lips together.

"*Eye on you*," he said flatly. "That's very funny." He dropped down to sit with his back against the wooden balustrade and Leah joined him. Three feet away, the Warlock's Eye winked imperviously at him.

"That didn't go very well," Leah said in her helpful voice. "Aren't you supposed to be silver tongued?"

"Usually I have more to work with than that. This Svadilfari fellow is clearly just a hostile personality." Loki sniffed.

"Don't act like that's the first time your reputation has preceded you."

"Too mean, Leah." Leah gave him a look which clearly said she thought she had not been mean enough and Loki affected to be deep in thought. Peeking through the slats in the wall behind him, he could see the clear lawn below the watchtower, like a town square for people who had no town. Svadilfari had stopped there to have the kind of conversation with his peers that could not have been more obviously about his Asgardian guests. Loki tried to look like he wasn't looking. "Well. The gentleman's promise of an unblinking eye does ruin plan A somewhat. And plans B, C, D and E."

"Hm," said Leah. "You had five distinct plans? I thought your usual approach was to cause chaos and hope the advantages fell on your side."

He stood up and leaned in to examine the icon. He wondered if he could get away with touching it. Probably not. "Plans A through E may have been variations on that theme," he said.

"Naturally. What will you do now?"

"Um." Loki jumped up onto the balustrade and steadied himself with a hand in the eaves to shout down, "Svadilfari!" In the square Svadilfari, and half a dozen others, looked up. "Will you give me the Warlock's Eye?"

"In exchange for what?" Svadilfari called back.

"As a token of your esteem!"

There were a few chuckles. "No!"

"Damn. What about money? Will you sell me the Eye?"

"No!"

Loki scowled, and dropped back down to sit with Leah. "Well, that was

plans F and G. They weren't my best, I'll admit."

Svadilfari's voice drifted up again, "Loki!" and Loki poked his head over the railing. "I feel badly that your trip has been for nothing! Say you will join us tonight at the fireside!"

"The what?"

"We gather at the fire pit to make merry! Come and be my guests!"

"If we do, will you give me the Warlock's Eye?"

"No! But you will have the pleasure of my company!"

Loki grinned as all the doors he needed opened for him. "Then how can I say no?" He slid back down the wooden wall to Leah, who was watching him patiently. "What a polite man."

Leah shook her head. "You don't have a clue what you're doing, do you?"

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The fire turned out to be mighty. At least fifteen feet tall, and Loki could hear it roaring at twenty paces. He supposed it must be keeping all the wolves and monsters of the hills at bay, and Svadilfari had been understating the matter when he'd said it was a gathering place. While the flames bathed the whole area in warmth and light, there were smaller fires dotted around it, at the kind of safe distance where people could cook over them and sit in circles sharing stories and ale. Musicians were to be found here and there, and people dancing. There was a pit filled with yellow hot coals, and around it the young people of the camp were daring each other to jump over. As Loki watched one of them, limber and puffed up with bravado, took a run and sketched a flip over the glowing pit. Her boots kicked up sparks as she landed on the other side.

There was a shout from the other side of the pit. Through the glowing specks in the air Loki spotted Svadilfari waving to them. "Over here!" he called, and gestured them to join him. He was far from alone, and Loki recognised something in the faces of the people around him that he was used to seeing in the people who crowded around his brother. Svadilfari was his people's version of Thor. Well, a few things made sense now.

They were all seated on the ground, and Loki sat on his crossed legs next to their host. Leah knelt primly with him, and Thori clambered into Loki's lap to have his ears scratched. "death and Ruin," he muttered contentedly.

Loki might have missed the slight chill in the air as he sat down, if he hadn't been such an expert in detecting when and where he was not welcome. The conversation in the group, which had probably been lively before, was muted a little, and smiles became a little more false. He exchanged a look with Leah. "Oh, Svadilfari," said one of the women in the circle. "These must be your Asgardian... guests."

"I invited them inside," said Svadilfari easily, "so I suppose they must be." The woman looked like she had more to say, but pressed her lips into a tight line and unsightly turned away.

Awkward. Loki looked up at the bright beacon burning in the fire pit.

"How much wood does it take to feed a fire like this?"

"We burn up half a forest in a week," said Svadilfari. "Why do you think we move so often? But it does make quite the spectacle."

"It does," Loki agreed. The centre of the fire burned like something living. It must have been built with some special skill that kept the logs and branches moving in a pattern. As one burned through to ash another one slid down it, and as that branch seesawed it forced another to rise. And all the while the fire itself stayed the same size and shape. There was some artistic magic in its engineering, he thought.

There had been music on the edge of Loki's notice since he sat down, and as he watched the fire spin inside itself he realised that he knew the song. Or he recognised parts of it, anyway, like he'd heard it whistled and then forgotten. Ikol fluttered onto his shoulder in that way he had, appearing from nowhere. There was a singer nearby, set up in the middle of a gaggle of young children, and he was singing a ballad about Svadilfari and Asgard. Asgard was not painted in the most flattering of lights. Svadilfari the clever young trickster ran in circles around the dull Asgardians and escaped into the sunset with his heart's desire.

Not the Warlock's Eye, Loki noticed. And the song seemed awfully well rehearsed to be so recent.

Svadilfari saw Loki listening and jerked his head at the singer. "My first visit to Asgard," he said simply. "It's not often an outworlder can win against you and yours."

"How long ago was that?" Leah asked thoughtfully. "And you're still singing about it?"

"That was the first time I met your boy here." Svadilfari nudged Loki with an elbow. "I made a fool of his friends, he made a fool of me, I made a fool of him..."

"Not hard to do," Leah commented, and Svadilfari laughed.

"It was in those days. Hence the songs. And, well, people here will jump on any excuse to sing about Asgard taking a hit."

Loki rested his hand on Thori's head. "How old were you then?" he asked. Svadilfari blinked at the question.

"Me? Loki, that was a dozen Ragnaroks ago. I can't even make a guess. Older than a boy, younger than an old man." His smile turned soft and nostalgic. "Young enough that the whole thing was terribly impressive and a little bit sexy."

On Loki's shoulder, Ikol rustled his feathers. "It was not nearly so impressive" he murmured below hearing, "as Svadilfari would like to remember it. Arguments could be made for sexiness."

Loki suddenly found he had lost all interest in this as a topic of conversation. It wasn't a lack of curiosity, just that Ikol was about a million

years old and that was wrong. He looked around. "So, is there food?"

It turned out there was food, and spare, at almost every fire. Heavy cooking pots full of herbed barley stew with root vegetables, oat cakes that were baked into spirals wrapped around sticks, thick fragrant concoctions of spiced tubers. Over one fire was a complex wire contraption that kept its load of greens tumbling in the smoke. It was more imaginative fare than Asgardia, which even at its culinary peak seemed quite attached to the theme of *large animal roasted on a spit*. And it was better than the best of Broxton. Not that it would take much gastronomic innovation to outdo the scrambled eggs at Merv's diner. But still... Svadilfari paused at one fire to snag a pastry from a heated rock, half cooked and stuffed with vine fruits, and Loki had to ask.

"Is there no meat at all?" Svadilfari stopped with his mouth full and blinked at him. "It's just... Thori doesn't like to eat anything that didn't have a face."

Down at his ankles, Thori perked up at his name "roll in The blood of Thousands," he said. And suddenly his voice was the loudest in the immediate vicinity. Loki had been on the receiving end of a few looks tonight that had been less than warm, but the stares levelled at Thori right now were nothing short of frosty. Loki blinked, confused.

Svadilfari swallowed. "A face?"

"Well, given the option, he prefers food that had a soul," said Loki, because sometimes he honestly couldn't stop himself, "but if I've told him once, I've told him a hundred times, he'll have to learn to settle."

"Loki," said Svadilfari, and Loki got the distinct feeling that he was being very slow. "There--"

"That thing devours souls?" The man tending the pastries turned ashen. "Svadilfari, you can't bring a thing like that into..."

"For what it's worth," said Loki helpfully, "I've never actually seen him devour a soul that was currently in use."

"It doesn't eat souls," said Leah firmly. "Just meat."

If anything, the shocked glares deepened. "There's no meat eaten inside these walls," Svadilfari said.

The way he said it sounded as though it should have been the most obvious thing in the world. Before Loki could so much as look at Ikol for answers, though, another man stepped forward, thunder in his eyes. His coffee complexion was darkened by the flush of anger, and darkened further than that by the flush of drink. He was approximately twice Loki's weight.

"Is it not enough," he growled, "that you bring a beast through our gates on a leash like that, you must turn him loose to devour us? Feed him on flesh?"

Loki blinked, and nudged Thori behind himself with one foot. "It was not my intention to feed people to the dog--" he began, explaining as to a child, but he was interrupted.

"You people of Asgard, you are all the same. You live in your golden city, you do what you want and think you sit in authority over the rest of us - and you come to swan around our cities and show no respect to our ways."

Loki glanced around at the loose crowd of people pretending unsuccessfully not to be an audience. Every rapidly deteriorating situation needed its own not-audience. He was relieved to note that they looked more embarrassed at their friend's behaviour than not. They probably wouldn't let him harm Loki. None seemed inclined to come to his rescue though.

Except Svadilfari, who put a hand on the aggressive stranger's arm. "Enough, Hradi. He's swanning around here because he was invited. Go, find yourself another drink and stop bothering my guests."

Hradi shook off the guiding hand with a grunt. "His presence here bothers me! He should be fed to the wolves himself, bringing such a thing... and he asks for meat?" Hradi's outrage was manufactured, surely, but the itch for a fight underneath it was real enough that Loki put on his friendliest voice.

"You're not truly planning to perpetrate a cartoonish level of violence against a child, are you?" In the corner of his eye Leah flexed her fingers loosely, a subtle spark of green energy jumping between them. "It was a foolish mistake, and I apologise - I'll take Thori past the walls, he can be for a while one of the terrible things that happen in the dark woods, and all is solved!"

"*All is solved*," piped the man in a high pitched voice that sounded nothing like Loki's. "You think feeding your filthy pet is *all solved*? Just because I'm the only one who'll say to your face you're not wanted here."

He jabbed his hand, blade like, at Loki's chest as he spoke, and Loki felt his face shutter into blankness. "Don't touch me," he advised.

"Should I not?" sneered Hradi. "Will you--" Jab. "--and your monster--" Jab. "--stop me, then?"

He twisted his fist in the front of Loki's shirt, yanked him off balance and pulled his other arm back to strike. Loki couldn't help it - he blinked, and in that moment the bulk of sixty pounds of fur, fire and misplaced rage came hurtling over his shoulder. "tear Out your brackish lungs!" growled Thori as he bowled Loki's attacker to the ground. Instantly the man started screaming. Thori's glowing hot breath gusted in his face as claws dug against his skin. "and beFoul your Chest cavity!"

Loki straightened up, and brushed off his clothes. "Get it off!" screamed Hradi in terror. "Call the demon off!"

"Loki," said Leah, folding her arms. "Your pet is making a nuisance of himself."

Loki tipped his head to one side to watch. "No, Thori," he said without much passion. "Bad dog." He paused. "Down, boy."

Five to ten seconds later, he reached over and tugged on the back of Thori's collar. Thori came grudgingly, but immediately to heel, and Loki leaned over

the prone man. He was just a bit singed. A bit singed and a bit traumatised. He'd be fine. Besides the scratches. He lifted Thori up into his arms and let the hellpup snuffle at his face. "Very bad dog," he said again, in a *good dog* tone of voice.

There was a brief moment's silence as the spectators tried to decide on what they had just spectated. It had all been quite fast. Then, just as suddenly as the trouble had arisen, the man at the cooking fire burst out laughing. He rounded the hot rocks to yank Hradi up to his feet. "Get up, y'old drunk," he said. He dusted him down, fingers seeking out the places where Thori had broken skin. All superficial. "You're not hurt, not beyond your pride. And I don't care one whit how little you like Asgardians inside the wall. The boy's Svadilfari's guest, and so's his dog. Here." He gestured a woman forward to take Hradi off his hands. "Take him to his bed, he can sleep it off."

Svadilfari had both his hands on Loki's shoulders. "You're all right?"

"Well," said Loki, "naturally I'm mortally offended at the mauling my tunic has taken, but given everything I'm sure I can let that pass." The cook guffawed again, and clapped him on the back with one meaty hand.

"Sorry about him, lad," he said. Loki scanned the crowd a second time. No more than a spoonful of blood spilled, and now the icy looks were outnumbered by the smiles. He found he wasn't sorry at all, but he was being led by the hand around the fire. "Let me soothe the insult. Did I not hear that the Trickster of Asgard was of Jotun stock? Here, you look not at all like a giant, but here, here." He thrust a cup into Loki's hands. "You drink that, young trickster. Jotun ale, from the old realm."

Svadilfari raised an eyebrow. "Jotun ale? He's a boy."

"Svadilfari, we all know he's not that."

"Actually-" Leah began, and Loki nudged her.

"Hush, Leah. It would be rude to refuse a man's offer of drink." He accepted the cup of dark, strong-smelling liquid, and others were poured for Leah and Svadilfari. "To your health," he said. "And to Hradi's sobriety." That won him another gale of laughter from the generous cook, and he drank. And he swallowed. Loki was not familiar with the taste of troll piss, but he imagined it must taste not entirely unlike Jotun ale. But Svadilfari and the cook responded as though they had found the taste pleasing, so Loki plastered his tongue to the roof of his mouth and waited until no one was looking to stick it out and wrinkle his nose.

"This is the worst tasting thing I've ever had in my mouth," he muttered aside to Ikol. "Ever."

"Not perhaps, the *worst* thing," the bird replied.

"Gross, Ikol."

"You brought it up. But if you're wise Loki, you'll take care with that. Jotun ale is among the more potent of intoxicants."

Someone in the circle was making a toast, probably the first of many, and

everyone held their cups high. "Advice noted, Evil me." Loki raised his cup with the rest and drank with them.

It was funny, thought Loki around the fourth or fifth cup of dark ale, how the alcohol seemed to not affect him at all. It was warming, certainly, but no more so than the fire and his head was comfortably clear. He was about to mention this to Leah, some hours into the night, when he stood up; the experience was colourful and packed, and he found himself back on the ground. This time it was spinning. He gave a surprised laugh.

"Something wrong?" Leah was sipping from her own fifth drink. Loki laughed again and it came out sounding like a giggle.

That should stop. He swallowed. "Nothing at all!" He cleared his throat delicately, then frowned. "Didn't I have a cup? I don't know where that went."

"You're missing your cowl, too."

Loki's hands flew to his head. His hair was loose, and less than tidy. "When did *that* happen?"

Leah was spared having to answer by Svadilfari sprawling to the ground between them. "Loki. Loki my friend. I think you need another one of these."

"No he doesn't," said Leah, but Loki was already accepting the offered cup.

"I do. How did you know I needed that?"

"Intuition!"

Svadilfari's intuition was fabulous, Loki thought, drinking deep. Also he had been mistaken about the ale tasting terrible. It was actually very good. "Come, Loki," Svadilfari was saying. "Come. The night's wagers have begun!"

"Ah! This is something I am keen to see. Lead the way, Svadilfari." Loki waited until Svadilfari's back was turned before waving Leah over so that she could help him walk. Just until the blood returned to his legs. She was obliging enough to lend an elbow to lean on.

"Not that I would stop you or anything," she said quietly as they followed Svadilfari, "but you're not going to join in gambling are you? You don't have very much to lose."

Loki shook his head. "I just want to watch Svadilfari at work. I expect it to be an elucidating experience."

Svadilfari led them almost halfway around the huge bonfire, which was an awful thing to do to a person, Loki thought, when his legs were being so recalcitrant. That thought was abandoned, though, when they rounded the great pyre to see the wagers that were taking place.

Short cropped grass with no cattle or flocks. Harnesses empty of horses. An entire camp full of earnest vegetarians. Loki wondered how it had taken him so long to put together the pieces. In the open space between fires, a woman reached her arms to the sky and *grew*, her body changing with the

inertia, rising from the ground and moulding itself to her will. The tawny brown of her skin turned to opalescent green, softness to scales. With a roll of her shoulders she dropped to the ground, no longer shaped like a woman but a dark scaled wyvern, claws and all. She screeched and reared up, sinking her now humongous fangs into the furred neck of a monstrous bear that Loki would bet anything had been a different shape minutes ago.

"Oh!" Svadilfari shouted. "Such violence, and in front of the children!" He sounded like he was trying to be shocked and disapproving, instead of delighted at the display. He dragged Loki back against him to shield his eyes, and Loki struggled under his hand to keep watching. "That's just terrible. What's the wager?"

"A contest of strength," replied one of the women watching. The bear managed to get its arms around its opponent and squeeze. "And of ferocity. Loser is the one who first cries *hold, enough*"

Svadilfari leaned back to observe the two beasts. "I'll lay ten on the wyvern," he grinned.

This was the best thing Loki had ever seen, bar none. "I lay ten on th--" Leah's hand clapped over his mouth.

"No bet," she said aloud. Into Loki's ear, "You promised."

Loki didn't think he had. But he supposed he might have promised and then forgotten, so he relented. "You're shapeshifters!" he said gleefully, prying Leah's hand away. "Of course you're shapeshifters! That's why... all of the things. And look at you holding all your shapeshifty showdowns!" He got the two words out without slurring on his first attempt, and that was impressive enough that he said it again, "Shapeshifty showdowns." Oh, there was that giggle again, better shut that down. "How do the contests work?"

Svadilfari dragged his eyes from the fight and nodded to another pair of shifters just shaking hands. "Over here, then." Loki and Leah followed him over to the pair, two women at the older end of adolescence. "Ladies, what's the wager?"

"You're all but too late, Svadilfari," said one of them. "This match is over when it starts."

The other girl shoved her opponent. "We're each vying to take the smallest shape. The stakes are high, and I will win!"

There was a man standing with them, holding a handful of paper scraps and it was to him that Svadilfari turned. He took the man's hand to read from the paper, then shot Loki a look, *not so high stakes*. "Take a look here," he said. "Each participant marks their chit, like so--"

They both marked a chit, supplied Loki's memory even as Svadilfari spoke, and handed it to a neutral arbiter. That was their chosen shape, and once they had chosen they were not permitted to change it, or try again. They shifted, and the contest began; strength, or size -which beast could howl the loudest or fly the highest, which of them could produce the most

poisonous venom. Or speed, said his memory, which of the two could out run the other.

"Loki?" Leah was looking at him curiously. Loki blinked.

"Hm? Oh. Odd moment, I'm fine. It was nothing. So smallest form wins?"

The arbiter held the chits out for him to read. One said *MOUSE*, the other *GRASSHOPPER*.

"My money is going on the mouse," said Svadilfari.

Leah cleared her throat. "And I don't have any money to bet with," said Loki dutifully. He frowned. "But, wait, mouse? A grasshopper is smaller isn't it?"

"It is," said Svadilfari as the two young women braced themselves to change. "But it's *too* small, she'll never make it. Watch."

They watched. This time Loki was prepared to see it - the shift was like an intake of breath, something strange like the woman's body became other than real. A drop of water on greased canvas. Where she was, suddenly she wasn't and a clap sounded of air rushing in to fill the space not filled by the body of a tiny mouse. It sat on the ground between undisturbed footprints, and looked supremely pleased with itself. All eyes turned to the still-woman-shaped rival. She bit her lip and looked uncertain and then Loki lost interest because his cup was mysteriously empty of ale and someone was calling his name.

"Loki! Loki will be the judge!"

Loki spun around searching for who had spoken. Two older gentlemen were waving him over. "Come, Asgardian, come be arbiter for us. The wager will be whose shape is more pleasing to Asgardian eyes! And since we have no such eyes ourselves, you and your lady must lend us yours."

"Are you asking me to judge who's prettier?" They nodded. "Yes I can do that. Show me how you change your shape! Leah!" He dragged Leah over to the men, and waited for them to exchange their chits. The man who'd called Loki over waited until his opponent wrote his, then read it, smiled, and wrote his own. Loki wondered if that was cheating, and determined to vote in his favour if it was. Cheating that blatant deserved recognition. The two men pressed scraps of paper into his hands as Svadilfari appeared again at his elbow.

"Loki. You have no attention span when you're drunk, do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Svadilfari," said Loki earnestly. "I am not at all drunk." He looked down at the chits he'd been handed.

Svadilfari laughed. "Where's your headpiece gone, Loki?"

Loki waved him urgently to silence, eyes fixed on the papers in his hand. Both read the same thing. He looked up. He had already missed the shift itself, and since handing him the two slips of paper both men had become--

"Leah!" he breathed, entranced. "Leah, look! They're bunny rabbits!" An odd squeaking noise came from his throat that couldn't possibly have

sounded as unmanly as he thought it had and he didn't worry too hard about it because one of the used-to-be-person-shaped bunnies had just stood up on its hind legs and Loki had never seen anything so darling. "Look how hoppity they are!"

"Hoppity is not a word, Loki." Leah even sounded exasperated. Loki would have savoured that as a victory if his world hadn't narrowed to cotton tails.

"It must be. I just said it didn't I?" Loki paused. "*Didn't* I?" Only drunk people slurred their words, and he still wasn't sold on this idea that he was drunk. He still felt clear headed. "Did I... not... something." Forget that now, the bunnies were hopping. "Oh, *look!* Can I hold them?"

"Better not to," said Svadilfari. "They're... They're not actual rabbits."

"Shapeshifters who don't want to be cuddled choose less adorable shapes to shift. Here, bunny! Thori!" Loki looked around for his puppy. "Thori, come see!"

Loki turned in place and shielded his eyes from the absent sun to search, and Svadilfari turned to Leah. "Reassure me that the dog is not here," he said.

"The dog is outside the camp's walls," she said. Svadilfari breathed a sigh of relief.

"Only Loki could end up with a hellion as a pet," he said with a rueful smile. "There's a story there."

"Only the obvious." Leah shrugged. "Loki has been cursed with both a weakness for cute things--" Loki was on his knees trying to convince one of the shifted rabbits to sit in his lap. "--and a warped view of what comprises cuteness."

Svadilfari's eyes were on her, his expression unreadable. "Hm," he said. "Warped? Or just unusual?"

"Hel's gardens," grumbled Leah as she watched Loki chase around after the poor hoppity shapeshifters. They were bounding in circles around him, and the job he was doing of staying upright was only as good as Leah would have expected. They both shot off, hopping for the hills, and Loki took off after them. Leah supposed she would have to follow.

Svadilfari watched him go too. "That boy used to hold his liquor better," he offered. "I suppose he's smaller now."

"I'm not really with him," Leah said. "I only follow him because I have to."

"Oh, Leah," said Svadilfari kindly. "No you don't."

He had somehow grasped the wrong end of a very complicated stick, and Leah thought about arguing. She decided to run after her trickster instead.

==

The morning came creeping in like it knew it had done wrong. There was the scent of tanned skins in the air, and small leathery sounds of tent flaps moving in the wind. Tendrils of smoke from the burnt-out fire were

dissipating as the sun rose and threw fingers of light across the camp. The light fell through cracks and landed on the sleeping form of one Loki Laufeyson. He whimpered at the rude offence.

"Nno," he mumbled thickly. "I refuse." He threw an arm over his eyes with a pained moan, just as a fluttering commotion landed on the bedroll by his head. The sound of feathers was louder than a battlefield.

"As I would have told you yesterday," said Ikol calmly, "had you been inclined to listen to me, Jotun ale is for consumption in moderation. Even by actual giants. For a pre-adolescent runt of a giant, perhaps *moderation* takes on a new wealth of meaning. Still, you should feel no compulsion to apologise for ignoring my warnings. In matters of ale, at least, overindulgence carries its own reward."

"That is a lot of words, Ikol, to say *I told you so*." He swatted at the bird who didn't have to be screaming right in his ear. "Next time, use four and give me a few more minutes to be miserable in peace."

A tent flap somewhere was thrown back, flooding the immediate area with light. More than light, uber-light. Light that had no business being so bright. Distant snuffling sounds indicated that he now shared his tent with a puppy sized hell hound. A shadow crossed his face and a full cup of water was placed beside him.

"Leah," he groaned. "Am I going to die?"

Leah crouched on her heels next to him. "Yes."

"Oh." He thought for a moment. "When?"

She pulled him up almost gently to sit, and pressed the water cup into his hands. She seemed interested in making him eat some food she'd brought as well, but the odour of it turned his stomach so he fed it to Thori while her back was turned. Blessed hydration did its work and eventually Loki began to feel a little less tender. In fact, he felt quite sanguine about the whole thing. It wasn't every day a young god survived his first hangover. He swallowed too much water too quickly and tensed. It also wasn't every day that a young god retched all over himself in front of his best friend. Better to keep the firsts to a minimum, he thought.

The previous night was all something of a blur. Judging by the scratches on his palms, there had been some attempt at a handstand, and he thought he definitely remembered at some point laughing while covered in brightly coloured butterflies. On reflection, those had probably not been real butterflies.

"Would you like to hear the worst of it?" Leah asked when he looked appropriately *compos mentis*.

"No thank you. Tell me the best of it, and pretend that's all I did."

"I wish I could. You made arrangements for the return of the Warlock's Eye."

Loki squinted at her through the dazzle of sunrise. "I did? Oh." He began

to smile. "Oh! Well, at least I--" He stopped smiling. "Wait, why do you wish I hadn't done that?"

"Because you challenged Svadilfari to a shifting match."

Loki blinked. Oh. Yes, that would certainly be a reason to temper one's optimism.

The specified challenge had been a contest of speed, Leah explained. In his state of advanced refreshment, Loki had challenged Svadilfari to a race. Svadilfari would take his fastest form, and Loki would... try to be faster than him. If Svadilfari lost, he would graciously return the Warlock's Eye that he had won in Asgard. If he won, Loki had sworn to steal a seedling from the golden orchard of Idunn and deliver the secret of Asgard's immortality to Asgard's enemies. Bits and pieces of memory surfaced as Leah spoke. Mostly the self satisfied grin on Svadilfari's face as Loki had outlined the wager to him, with enthusiasm. Jerk.

Leah wound down and watched Loki for his reaction. Loki didn't have one. "Oh," he said. "I wonder if I had a plan when I did that?"

"I doubt it," said Leah. "Can you think of one now?"

"Of course!" He probably could. If his head would stop pounding. He took a hurried sip from his cup to buy time, and frowned. "This is empty."

Leah rolled her eyes at his pitiable confusion and took the cup from his hands. Loki smiled brightly as she took it back to whatever well or pump had brought the first lifegiving draft. Then he slumped backwards. "This may be a problem," he said aloud.

"Indeed," replied Ikol. "The lady Idunn doesn't trust you nearly enough yet to allow you access to her orchard."

"I haven't lost yet."

"Yet. But Svadilfari is a talented sorcerer, Loki, and these matches are about more than the choice of animal form. If two shapeshifters both choose to become wolves, one will still howl more loudly than the other. A good shapeshifter in the form of a horse will still be faster than a poor one in the shape of a cheetah."

"But I can't shapeshift even at all!"

"I know," said Leah appearing back at the tent flaps with Loki's refilled cup. "If only you'd had a sober friend present to tell people so. She might have won you two extra days to prepare for the race. And the right to choose the race course yourself. That would have been convenient."

Loki perked up. "Two days? Is that long enough to learn to shapeshift?"

He looked over to Ikol, who offered the bird version of a shrug. "Poorly." Loki beamed.

"Leah, you are the best!"

Leah brushed some imaginary dust from her skirt. "You're probably still going to lose," she said.

"Perhaps," Loki grinned, "but you still just referred to yourself as my

friend!" He spread his arms wide. "Come, BFF! Bequeath upon me a hug!"

"No."

"Come on. Don't leave me hanging."

"No."

Arms still open. "I'm hanging, Leah!"

Leah was immovable as stone. "I have a question. When you lose this race and Idunn kills you for trying to steal from her, do you think she'll mulch your body into fertiliser or hang it over the gate to scare birds?"

Loki let his arms fall to his side with a wounded glare. Ikol landed on his shoulder. "Fertiliser, surely," he muttered in his ear. "The corpses of giants are most rich in nutrients."

===

Having a BFF who was impossible to intoxicate had won Loki two days to learn what his past self had known well. Most of the first day down, though, and Loki was sitting cross legged in the middle of their tent with his eyes closed. Leah, for her part, was being very patient. Loki supposed it had something to do with being a shepherd of the dead, and having no concept of boredom. In her place, he would have run out of patience in minutes.

But everyone had their limits. "Loki," she said, startling him awake. "This is...?"

"Hush, Leah, don't distract me. I'm getting in touch with my animal centre."

"Your centre."

"Which is animalian." The fact that he had just said it was what made it a word.

"It looks like you're just sitting."

"Well, I'm not. I'm in search of the beast inside myself."

"Are you sure you're not just wishing with all your might that you had not made this wager?"

"No, I'm searching. I expect my inner beast is hiding under something, that's all. Now, hush, I need to concentrate."

"Of course, Loki."

===

One new dawn, and most of a day gone, and Loki was busy hitting the ground for the five hundredth time. Apparently, shapeshifting was difficult. Leah rested her elbow on her knee, her chin on her hand and watched. Even though her expression gave away as much nothing as it usually did, every part of her save her tongue was singing, *this is your own fault, Loki*. The worst part was the knowing that she was right. Loki let his head thunk back against the dusty floor inside the tent.

"I can't feel my legs," he said. "Leah, be a dear and check whether I still have them?"

Unnecessarily, Leah craned her neck to look. "Yes," she said. "But remind

me - are they supposed to end in claws?"

Loki shot into a sitting position, eyes wide. His feet were still there, inside boots, and he wiggled his toes gingerly to make sure. Definitely still toe shaped. He glared. "That was unkind."

"You're right," agreed Leah. "I should have warned you about the furry tail instead."

Loki did not look over his shoulder to check. He arched his back a little against the floor, but he had known he wouldn't feel anything, so Leah's taunting had failed. He hadn't been trying to grow a furry tail anyway, not really. Technically, he hadn't succeeded in growing claws. Ikol only had time to teach him a single animal form before his contest against Svadilfari, and judging by Loki's progress it might turn out to be a very short competition. They'd turn up, Loki would flail around a little, then fall over, and Svadilfari would run the course alone. Another one for the bards to sing about, definitely. He lay back down with a thunderous sigh.

"the hounds Of hell were Built for carnage," said Thori peevishly from his spot in the corner. "this is Tedium." Leah didn't look like she disagreed.

"Again," said Ikol. His beady bird-eyes glinted in the shadows of the tent. "Lying there feeling sorry for yourself gets you no closer to maintaining a borrowed shape."

Loki grunted. "I'll try again in a second," he said. "I don't feel quite solid in myself after the last attempt. Let me learn to be Loki-shaped for a moment."

"a cocked Leg on all Of your Shapes."

Loki's eyes opened. "Ah," he said. "Leah? Can you take the dog outside?"

===

Two days and half the night, and the race was less than eight hours away when Loki finally made a form stick. He surprised himself, in fact, while his mind was busy plotting routes to steal unseen into Idunn's orchard. He had to change back, and then change again to convince himself it had actually worked. But it had.

The tent was still dimly lit by nothing more than a single candle, but now the light seemed clearer. He'd wondered if his new form might be colour blind, but suddenly colours were sharper and more defined. He thought he could see a few more colours, even, that he didn't have names for. Leah, whose hair was now so much more than black, was watching him.

"You know," she said, "the children of this tribe tell me that they spend months preparing for their first shapeshift. It's a rite of passage celebrated by the whole family. People don't do this in two days." Loki preened. "I hope you don't expect me to find that impressive."

Loki, who knew the difference between wanting and expecting, shook his head. His neck wasn't quite built for that gesture anymore, and it probably looked ridiculous. But even though his new face was one with few expressions, inside he was smiling. As long as he could hold this shape for

any length of time, he could participate in the race. And he was Loki. If he was in a race, he could win it. Leah held out a finger to him, and he bit it, in as friendly a fashion as he could.

Of all the forms he'd tried to master, of course it would be this one that stuck. Silly to expect otherwise, really.

===

Two days were up. The morning of the race, and they were gathered at the top of a hill, some distance outside the walls. The camp itself was a scattering on the hillside behind them, and the grass was billowing in the breeze. This high up, wind caught Leah's hair and sent it spinning around her head. Loki enjoyed the fact that his own hair was inaccessible, and pointed.

"See, the river runs straight through this valley. It's widest here, and it runs fast. There's probably wildlife. And--" He walked around behind Svadilfari while he looked down at the waters. "--there's the woods, trees to get in our way. Not to mention the steep downward slope, and the even steeper upward one... That tree there." He pointed to the hilltop opposite them, past the perilous woods and waters and inclines. A lone tree was outlined against the sky. "That's the finish line."

"Circuitous route," remarked Svadilfari.

A small crowd had turned out to watch the contest, and they stood with Leah and Thori behind the two competitors. Loki knew exactly what they were there for, and who they were hoping for as victor. The match was nothing to do with a trophy to them; it was their best and brightest against the Most Clever of Asgard. In their eyes, Asgard never fell and Asgardia was the same colonial nonsense it had been before under new management. Knowing that, Loki almost felt bad for what he was about to do. But he was not Asgardia's champion and the match was Loki versus Svadilfari as well. Something in the very core of him wanted to win this one, and why should Loki deny his own self?

"Not so circuitous," he said. "You can take any route you'd like. Want to go around the forest? Be my guest. Think you can find a better place to ford the river - Svadilfari, if you want to set off running in the opposite direction and put a girdle around the planet before I can reach the tree, then... well, congratulations, because that would be quite impressive. But you'd still win."

"There's a catch somewhere."

"I'm Loki. There's always a catch." Loki didn't add that, given that he was a novice competing against a master, there was no amount of outrageous cheating he could do that would make this more unfair than it was. There was no dignity in complaining about a situation you had engineered. Even if he was never drinking ale again. "My reasoning is that in all of that terrain there must be *someplace* I will be faster than you."

Svadilfari laughed. "Good reasoning."

Loki cleared his throat. "I was thinking that perhaps Leah could be our arbiter." He watched clarity dawn in Svadilfari's eyes.

"Ah, is *that* how you mean to do it?"

There was a heart and centre to every confidence trick, and it was almost always the same. Keep your opponent uncertain - or else make them certain of the wrong thing. In truth, it was no more difficult than normal to lie to a person who knew you were lying. Just let them discover the lie they thought you were telling, and they would stop looking for the one you'd hidden in your sleeve. Because they'd be *confident*. Two nights ago, Svadilfari had been a darling of a man. Now he was looking at Loki as though the Asgardian trickster had already chosen the form of a viper.

He widened his eyes in a very un-viper-like look of hurt. "Wha- Svadilfari! I am scandalised by your suggestion that I would cheat... in such an unimaginative manner! And even more so that you would impugn Leah's honour. She's at least as unbiased as any of your friends."

"I'm mostly curious to see what Loki will do once he's banished from Asgardia for trying to steal from the Allmother," Leah offered. Loki shot her a betrayed look.

"Thanks, BFF. I don't cheat, Svadilfari. I find... creative solutions."

"There's no room to be creative in a race, Loki." He peered down at the treetops, trying to pierce the canopy and see the waters beneath. "Are there sea serpents in the river?"

"Wouldn't that make them river serpents? Svadilfari, I have been sequestered in a tent for two days, learning how to shapeshift. I've had no *time* to lay traps. I came out this morning, found two trees and thought *that will do*."

"Hm." Svadilfari was still smiling, but his eyes were more focussed than lasers. "You know that you can only select one animal form for the race?"

"I- one?" Some lies you wore on your lapel, to protect the ones tucked in an inside pocket. "Of course I knew that. Really, only one form for the climbing, running and swimming?" He turned to Leah. "Did I know that?" Leah nodded. "Oh. No it's fine, I can still do that."

"Thinking of forfeiting, Loki?" asked Svadilfari.

Loki smiled. It was a smile less self assured than the smiles he'd smiled before. The trick was in making confidence look like bravado... "Not on your life. All right," he said. "How does this take you - we will each make our choice, and then Leah will read them aloud. No space for underhanded tactics there!"

The look in Svadilfari's eyes was one designed to make Loki feel like his head was transparent and everything inside was writing on a wall. Then he shook his head. "You're right," he said wryly. "I can't think of a single way to cheat under such scrutiny as all that. But, so. Let's begin." Leah held out a scrap of paper to him, and he held it in his cupped hand to write.

Their audience, already hushed, turned silent anticipation into an art form. Here was where they knew the race could be lost or won. Even if the two contenders were this different in skill, there was still guile. And in the hands of Asgard's trickster, enough guile could make skill a petty irrelevance.

Leah took the chit and raised her voice. "Svadilfari has chosen to take the form of a horse," she read.

Ikol was sitting above Loki's head in the branches of the tree that was the starting line, and Loki could not miss the way the bird bristled. Svadilfari was looking at him steadily with the ghost of a smile. His opening salvo, Loki supposed, that was intended to unsettle him. Ah, if only he had the memories Ikol did. Obediently, though, he gasped. "A horse? But Svadilfari! What if you trip on the way down? You know, if you break your leg I'll be sorry to lose you, I really will." He accepted his own chit from Leah, and gestured Svadilfari to turn around. Leaning on his back, he wrote, and handed it back.

The assembled shapeshifters were all waiting, hoping for their hero to outsmart all comers. Among these people a trickster was a hero. And Loki would never be among them because he had beaten their best. Pride was a terrible thing.

Leah unfurled the little scrap of paper to read aloud. "And Loki has chosen to take the form of a magpie."

It took a few seconds for the full import of that to sink in, and when it did the crowd erupted. It was a deeply satisfying experience. Salvo returned. Loki always did enjoy the chance to be the second shot fired. And the last. He shaded his eyes to look at the finish line, stark foliage against the sky.

"It's about a hundred yards, wouldn't you say?" He flashed Svadilfari a brilliant smile. "As the crow flies."

For a moment, less than half a second, fury chased across Svadilfari's features. Then he burst out laughing. He dashed away tears with a shake of his head. "Loki," he said, and seemed lost for words. "Loki, you..." He turned away without warning, and with a short running start he *changed* and leapt into the steep decline. His hooves cut the earth.

Loki was left behind, scrambling to get in the air. He changed in a cloud of black and white feathers and his heart swelled in his breast. Svadilfari was fast, but wings were faster. The race was his.

His elation burst out of him as birdsong that filled the sky, and he soared.

===

"Loki. This is getting tedious."

Leah craned her head back to glare, and the black-and-white bird peered down at her curiously. *What is tedious?* said the tilt of its head. *I am a magpie. I do not understand your people words.* It radiated magpie-ness from every feather, filling the whole tree with magpie-ness. It was more magpie-like than any real magpie would ever bother to be, and Leah folded

her arms. She thought about stamping her foot, too. Thori sat next to her ankles, staring steadily up into the foliage, his tail wagging hungrily from side to side.

"Trouble in the victors' camp?" asked a voice from behind her. Svadilfari was dragging a small wagon up the hill, and the Warlock's Eye icon in it. He rolled it to a stop and shaded his eyes to peer up at Loki, who flitted to a new branch and trilled at him. "Ah, that sometimes happens to new shifters. The animal form gets to feel awfully comfortable. It's odd no one thought to warn him about that one."

"In a camp full of experienced shapeshifters," said Leah flatly. "Yes, odd." She nodded at the icon. "Is that for us?"

Svadilfari nudged the wagon in her direction with a foot. "Loki won the race fairly, after a fashion," he said. "I can hardly withhold it because he's a sly little bastard. I knew that going in." Up above, Loki chirped joyfully, and Svadilfari offered the bird a wry salute. Loki flapped down from his perch, flew a short victory lap around Svadilfari's head and before Leah could think to make a grab for him he flew back up out of reach.

"We have what we came for," she called up the tree. "And you have promises to keep. You can't stay a magpie forever." Loki made a fretful warbling sound, *yes I can*. "No, you can't." Warble. "Can not!"

"He'll change back in time," Svadilfari said. He was hiding laughter. "They always do when they realise they don't have the instincts to live like a bird." Which was all very well, thought Leah, but she needed Loki back now, not in a few months when he couldn't figure out how to migrate. She narrowed her eyes.

"If you don't come down now, I will let Thori eat you."

"snap it up Like a blood Filled morsel," agreed Thori cheerfully, and Loki's pinprick talons landed immediately on Leah's shoulder. Leah tried not to smile too triumphantly. A sharp little magpie beak worried at her hairpins in revenge.

"If you try to build a nest with my hair ornaments," she said, "I will roast you and eat you myself."

Loki froze, beak full of metal, and then he carefully tucked the pin back in behind her ear. She waited until he settled quiescently onto her shoulder before reaching down and hoisting up the Eye icon. Svadilfari huffed surprise, but it couldn't have been more than three hundred pounds of rock. She tucked it under her arm and with her tricky magpie on her shoulder, and hellhound at her heels she set out to make the journey back to Asgardia.