

FROM

LOKI

WHERE MISCHIEF LIES

BY

—

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MARVEL

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Part One



Chapter One

The Royal Feast of Gullveig, like all Asgardian feast days, was enjoyable for those who were fond of listening to overly long speeches, exchanging inane niceties, and getting their feet stepped on, because the Great Hall was always too crowded and no one knew how to walk in heels.

Loki was convinced everyone loathed the feasts but no one dared say so for fear of appearing small-minded. Being quite confident of the size of his mind—large—and his ability to walk in heels, he was comfortable saying it.

“I hate feast days.”

In the royal receiving line beside him, Thor didn’t drop the politician’s smile he had been practicing for

state occasions like this. It had only faltered when Loki had suggested showing that much teeth made it very obvious there was something stuck in them, and he had fumbled with his tongue for several minutes—lips bulging in a grotesque way that made several approaching courtiers change course—before realizing there was nothing there.

“The feasts are important days,” Thor said. “They instill competence in Asgard’s leaders among our court.”

“*Confidence*,” Loki corrected.

The smile didn’t slip, but Thor’s eyebrows crept together. “What?”

“I memorized the same quote,” Loki replied. “It’s *confidence*.”

“What did I say?”

“You— Never mind.” Loki fixed his own overly large smile, raising his voice so Thor could hear him over the musicians playing a lively folk song. “You did it perfectly.”

Thor adjusted the circlet resting on his forehead. Beads of sweat were beginning to gather around it, and it was slipping over his brows. Loki had been offered a circlet as well—his mother had selected a silver braid inlaid with small gemstones for him. But while Loki loved few things as much as a bit of sparkle, he had

opted instead for a more sophisticated, understated look that the circlet would have ruined entirely. He didn’t have to enjoy feast days, but he could look good for them. The boots made him feel like doing a strut down the middle of the hall—black, over the knee, and with heels as long and thin as the knives he kept up his sleeves. His coat had a high collar and green ribbing on the shoulders, and he wore loose trousers of the same color. Amora had told him green made his eyes look like jewels, but he had been careful not to wear it too often. Best not to let Amora think he was taking her advice too seriously. She might have always been right, but she didn’t have to know that.

Loki glanced down the line of dignitaries, past Thor and Frigga in her flowing silver robes, hands tucked beneath the sleeves as she smiled and nodded to the Asgardian woman fumbling a compliment about how lovely the queen’s hair looked with its streaks of gray. On her other side were the ambassadors from Varinheim and Ringsfjord, talking with their heads bent toward Queen Jolena, who kept asking loudly if they could speak up. Past them, Karnilla, the Queen of Norns and Odin’s royal sorceress, stood like a soldier, the plaits of her dark hair wound together and wrapped around a gold headpiece with a purple stone set upon her brow. Her face was blank—in the time she’d been

at court, Loki had never seen her wear any expression beyond a dutiful grimace of acknowledgment. One of her long-fingered hands rested on Amora's shoulder, like she was certain her apprentice would slip away if a hold wasn't kept on her.

It wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

Amora was looking far more obviously bored than Loki felt she should. Far more bored than he was sure he could get away with without a lecture from his father. She may get one from Karnilla too, but Amora seemed to care so much less about what her teacher thought than Loki did about Odin's opinions. He wished he could afford not to care, not to feel like everything he did right or wrong was ticked off in a corresponding column and kept on file for the day Odin would name either him or Thor as the heir to the Asgardian crown. It would be so much easier if there were only one of him—Amora was the only student Karnilla had ever taken on and the only magic wielder in Asgard powerful enough to take up the mantle of royal sorceress and Queen of the Norns. Amora's power made her desired; Loki's power made him feel the need to keep it hidden.

No one wanted a sorcerer for a king. The kings of Asgard were warriors. They wore their golden hair long and their armor polished and their scars from battle

casually on display like ostentatious accessories. *Oh, this old thing? Merely a token from a rogue Sakaaran who was foolish enough to test his strength against mine.*

Amora managed to wriggle away from Karnilla's side long enough to snatch a goblet off the tray of a passing kitchen servant, and Loki watched as she touched one finger to the surface and levitated a small drop from it. It hung in midair, a few inches from her palm, until Karnilla reached over without looking and clamped a hand over Amora's, squashing the spell. Amora rolled her eyes, then, perhaps sensing the inappropriate duration of Loki's gaze, glanced around. She caught his eye, and offered her crooked finger of a smile. Loki felt his ears go red, and he almost looked away, like that would negate the fact that she'd caught him staring. Instead he offered her an exasperated eye-widening, to which she responded by pantomiming hanging herself.

He snorted. Thor frowned at him, then followed his gaze, but Amora had straightened herself out again, smiling alongside Karnilla at the courtier who had come to speak to them. She seemed to be putting a great deal of effort into making her smile look as forced as possible—as much as Thor had been putting into making his look sincere—but she was smiling, so no one could accuse her of a contrary disposition.

Thor's frown went deeper, burying his circlet

farther into his brow, and he pushed it up before turning forward with a huff that sounded like an imitation of their father.

When Loki caught Amora's eye again, she made a subtle gesture down at the tiles and raised her eyebrows.

Loki hesitated. Carrying out the small spells she taught him at a dinner or in their classroom was one thing, but doing it at a state function was quite another. It would be harmless—turning the tiles of the Great Hall pink had been his idea, after all. But he had suggested it half in jest, hoping he would impress her with the boldness of the idea and creative use of spell weaving without actually having to execute it.

But Amora had to see everything through to the end. Everything that could be tried had to be, no matter the consequences. And there were always consequences, whether a whack on the back of the head from a wearied tutor or a private summons to Karnilla's chambers.

Amora did it all anyway.

Loki felt the burn of jealousy at her fearlessness—the way she didn't seem to feel any shame when Odin or Karnilla scolded her. His own heart always twisted no matter how high he raised his chin in defiance. No matter how blameless he thought himself. Once, as a boy, Loki had used his magic to extinguish all the lights in the palace simultaneously. He was baffled when Odin

had not been delighted and proud as he expected, but rather so enraged Loki had feared his father might strike him. Instead, Loki was sent to his chambers to sit in isolation, wriggling with a shame he didn't understand, before his mother finally came and explained that it would be best if he did not use the magic he could feel vibrating through his bones, but instead dedicated himself to becoming a warrior like his brother. It would be best, she had said, for his future. She had spoken gently—it was the only way his mother ever spoke—but the humiliation of that moment had never managed to detach itself from every spell he cast.

Though he had done very little spell-casting until Amora arrived in court. He had tried to make himself a warrior, tried to run faster and train harder, learn to take a blow without buckling. All the things Thor seemed to do without trying, the skills they had been told were most becoming of a future king of Asgard, while Loki's only skill seemed to be turning the mead in his brother's goblet into slugs once he began to drink, and then back into wine when he spat it out.

It wasn't the best strategy for dealing with emotions, but it was *his* strategy.

The slug trick was what first caught Amora's attention. When Thor had sputtered his mead across the table, Odin had berated him for his poor manners

in front of their guests, the Norn Queen, Karnilla, and her apprentice, Amora, on their first night in the Asgardian palace. As Thor had insisted over and over that there were slugs, there had been slugs, he was certain there had been slugs, Loki's gaze had drifted across the table to Amora without knowing why, only to find she was already watching him. The corners of her mouth had turned up around her fork. But then she looked away, and he had gone back to staring at his stew.

He had told himself the slugs were to get his brother back for knocking him flat in the sparring ring that morning in spite of promising not to—a promise that had been quickly forgotten once he realized Sif was watching. It wasn't because Amora was a magician—the first other magic-wielder he'd ever met besides his mother, whose uses of magic were always small and controlled. *Tea party magic*, as Loki had begun to think of it. Frigga had always worked to keep her powers out of sight, and encouraged Loki to do the same. But Amora was allowed to wear *her* powers on her sleeve and flaunt them as part of her training for her future position in court. It wasn't because her long hair was the color of honey and she wore it wrapped around her head in an endless loop that looked like snakes winding together. It wasn't because of those slanted features or that crooked smile.

What did you expect? He chided himself as he poked at a chunk of meat, watching it bounce back to the thick, oily surface. *For her to be thrilled about finding another magic-wielder in Asgard?* A magician who had never been taught to control his powers, which meant they usually escaped in inelegant, clumsy stunts he was struggling to teach himself?

The slugs had been good, though.

His gaze drifted again to Amora, but her dark eyes—black but for a few thin veins of emerald that forked through them like an acidic lightning storm—were on Karnilla. As she listened to Karnilla and Odin discuss the upcoming tutelage Amora would be given at court before the Feast of Gullveig and how it would prepare her for her future role as right hand to one of Odin's sons, Loki felt small and strange again, not worthy of notice by someone he had thought might resemble himself.

But at the end of the meal, when he finished his wine, he'd found a small snail at the bottom, writhing lethargically in the dregs. He'd looked up, but Amora was already gone, leaving him with that single disgusting calling card.

"The slug trick is clever," she told him later, when he found her in the palace library, curled into the bench of one of the circular windows that overlooked

the gardens. She had a stack of books at her feet that he was certain she had selected only for aesthetic effect. “But what if you waited to change them until just as he was swallowing? It’s far more horrifying to swallow a mouthful of slugs than to spit one out all over the table, don’t you think?”

Loki hadn’t thought of that. He also wasn’t certain he had enough control of his own magical powers to time a spell so perfectly.

When he didn’t say anything, Amora’s eyes flicked up from the page of the book she had open on her lap, and he was certain she knew how good aloofness looked on her. She had let her braids loose, and the tilt of her chin sent her hair cascading perfectly down her shoulders, like a carpet unfurled before the feet of a visiting king. “Who taught you how to do that?” she asked.

“No one,” he replied. He had honed any skills he had alone, making his grasp of his own powers rough and rudimentary and frustratingly tenuous. He could feel the well inside him, how deep and strong it ran, but could find no way to tap it.

“I didn’t know Odin’s son was a sorcerer,” she said.

“There’s a reason for that.” He wanted to sit beside her, but somehow that felt too presumptuous, a bold assumption that he was interesting enough for her to want around. Instead he went for a casual lean against

one of the shelves, which he realized mid-tilt was much farther away than he had thought. “Asgardians don’t want their princes to be magicians. It’s not the sort of power they value.”

Amora stared at him for a moment, then folded the corner of the page before shutting the book, a gesture that felt like such destruction in miniature that it made Loki want to crease the pages of every book in his father’s library.

“Hasn’t Odin hired someone to teach you?” she asked. “Or your mother? She’s a sorceress.”

“No,” he said, certain he sank a few inches deeper into the carpet. “I mean, yes, she is. But my father doesn’t want me to study magic.”

“Because he’s afraid of you.”

Loki laughed before he could stop himself at the thought of Odin, built like a boulder and with a rough, smashing demeanor to match, being frightened of his own son, particularly the smaller, skinnier one. “He’s not afraid of me. He just wants me to be the best contender for the throne that I can be, so he has me train with the soldiers.”

Now it was Amora’s turn to laugh. “That’s like keeping a warship in shallow waters. What a waste.” She stroked the spine of the book, appraising him. She seemed to be made of smoke the way her body spiraled

and swooped with the shape of the windowsill. She had kicked off her shoes, and her bare toes curled against the stone. “You’re not a soldier,” she said. “You’re a magician. And someone ought to teach you how to be one.”

“Someone ought to,” he replied.

She offered him a smile, one that felt like a dagger drawn slowly from its sheath, that dangerous hum of scraping metal in the moment of stillness that preluded a strike. Then she flipped open the book on her lap again, and his heart dropped, thinking he had been too opaque, too unreadable, too cold, all the things his brother wasn’t, the things his tutors had told him not to be, the things the other trainees in the warrior camp had teased him for.

But then she slung her feet off the seat beside her and said, “Are you going to sit down?”

And he did.

That had been months ago. Months over which Loki and Amora had knit themselves into an inseparable duo that the servants whispered about and the courtiers disapproved of. Even now, in the Great Hall on a feast day, Loki felt their eyes glancing at him, trying to determine whether his partnership with Karnilla’s headstrong apprentice had altered him in a way they could see.

Above him, the candles in the boat-shaped chandeliers that lined the Great Hall flickered, their light

dancing along the golden leaf that blanketed the wainscoting. The shape of the ceilings had always reminded him of the inside of an instrument, bowed and curved in places designed to amplify sound and make every gathering feel bigger and more impressive. Loki peeked down at the tiles under his feet, black with streaks of gold shooting through them, carving out the elaborate intricate roots that joined to form Yggdrasil at the base of the grand stairway. When he met Amora’s gaze again, she did an exaggerated eyelash flutter and pressed her hands together in pleading, and he knew he would set the hall on fire and then run naked through it if she asked.

“What are you plotting?” Thor muttered beside him.

“Plotting?” Loki repeated, pinning on his best smile to scare an approaching courtier away from them. “I never plot.”

Thor snorted. “Please.”

“Please what? Please plot?” Thor ground his foot into Loki’s, and Loki bit his tongue to stifle a squeak of pain. “Careful, I love these boots more than I love you.”

Thor glanced down the row again, to where Amora had put on another exaggeratedly innocent face. Thor had not taken to her the way Loki had. He had joined them on a few escapades around the palace, but always with his feet dragging, checking over his shoulder to be

certain they wouldn't be caught, and repeating "I don't think we should be doing this" so often that Amora had suggested they start charging him for every repetition. Eventually he had stopped coming along, which suited Loki fine. He didn't want to share Amora with his brother. He didn't want to share her with anyone. She was all his in a way no one had ever been. No one had ever wanted to be. And it was nice to see Thor left out of conversations for once.

Thor had never offered a direct opinion on Amora. No one had—they just whispered about her behind her back the way everyone always had about Loki. Too unpredictable, too strong, shouldn't be allowed out of Nornheim, even if the king and his sorceress thought the structure and rigidity of the royal court would temper her strong will.

Suddenly, three thundering *booms* cut through the chatter ringing around the hall. The musicians silenced and the courtiers hushed, rotating toward the top of the grand stairway. Loki pivoted along with the rest of the royal officials in their receiving line and turned his face upward, to where Odin stood, dressed in his feast day robes of claret-deep red, his spear, Gungnir, in his fist. His beard was woven with golden thread, and on his brow was a circlet in the same style as Thor's. Loki

felt a twinge of regret. Perhaps he should have worn his after all, no matter that it clashed with the rest of his ensemble.

"Asgardians!" Odin boomed, his voice echoing off the curved ceiling and carrying easily through the hall. "Friends, visitors, distinguished guests from across the Nine Realms, you honor us with your presence at this, our holy Feast of Gullveig."

Loki had heard some variation on this speech at every feast day since he was a boy. It was remarkable how many heroic warriors Asgard had decided to commemorate with their own feast days, and while the food was always good, it was never worth having to stand in an awkward receiving line, getting pats on the head from courtiers, and then enduring his father's dull speech about whatever blond man with rippling biceps and an insatiable thirst for the blood of Asgardian enemies was being honored that particular day.

But the Feast of Gullveig was different in one substantial way.

"Today," Odin continued, touching one finger to the patch that covered his empty right eye socket as he looked around, "we celebrate the day of the warrior king who, one hundred centuries ago, harnessed the rime flows of Niflheim in the Siege of Muspelheim and

from it forged the Godseye Mirror. That same Mirror has been brought up from the palace vault and, with the strength and power of our royal sorceress from Nornheim, shall grant a vision of the decade to come and the threats Asgard shall need to arm ourselves against. This is the way we keep our kingdom safe from threats from across the Nine Realms, and from Ragnarok itself. The Godseye Mirror gives no answers, and no certainty. Its eye is open for only this one day each decade, but it is the visions it reveals that have helped keep Asgard fortified and strong for centuries. At the end of this feast day, I will confer with my generals and advisors, and we will devise the best strategies for the future prosperity of our people.”

Loki had learned all of this from his history teachers in preparation for the feast—the first in his memory that the Godseye Mirror had been brought out and Karnilla had come to wield its powers—but he still pushed himself up on his toes for a better look as the curtain behind his father was drawn back by the two Einherjar soldiers.

The Godseye Mirror was a wall of shimmering black obsidian—a perfect square set in a thin gold frame with carved gold staves curling around each corner. He had seen it before, when Odin had taken both him and

Thor down to the vault below the palace and explained to them the power of each object kept there and the lengths to which he had gone to keep his people safe from it, but here, away from the dark walls and dim light of the vault and no longer surrounded by the host of artifacts Odin had captured to prevent the end of the world, it felt more imposing. More powerful. The Mirror stood straight on its own, with no feet or supports. The already silent hall seemed to sink into an even more absolute stillness.

Karnilla had ascended the stairs, and when Odin extended a hand to her, they walked together to the Mirror. He took his place on one side, she on the other, her palms pressed flat against the surface. Odin handed Gungnir to one of the Einherjar, then turned to his people again, arms extended. “To another decade of peace and prosperity in our great realm!”

Loki felt something brush his elbow, and then Amora’s voice was in his ear. “So do we change the tile now, while your father is occupied, or do we want to be certain everyone sees how poorly fuchsia clashes with his robes?”

Loki’s response was cut off by a crackle of energy from the top of the stairs. He felt the hairs on his neck rise, the air suddenly feeling hot and heavy like the

prelude to a lightning storm. A fork of white light erratically split the ceiling of the Great Hall. The assembled courtiers gasped, but from her spot across the Mirror from Odin, Karnilla raised a hand and the light flew to her fist, gathering around it in a cyclone. Loki felt his mouth hang open, marveling at the elegance, the control, the way the magic moved through the air and answered her call.

He felt Amora poke him in the back. "Loki."

Karnilla opened her hand and pressed it to the obsidian surface. The staves at each corner of the Mirror glowed, the lines of each rune flaring so bright it seemed for a moment they might ignite. The surface rippled like a pond struck by a stone, and Odin's eye turned white, the images of Asgard's future flashing across the Mirror's surface unseen by anyone but him.

"I have a feeling you're not listening to me," Amora said, this time her lips so close to Loki's ear that he felt her breath.

"Quiet," Thor hissed at them from Loki's other side.

Amora pivoted to him. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting something important?"

Another crackle of light dancing across the ceiling flew to Karnilla's hand.

"Show some respect," Thor hissed through his teeth.

"Is something about my speaking disrespectful?" Amora replied.

"Yes—the fact that you are speaking at all."

Loki felt a sudden hand on his shoulder, and turned as his mother stepped between him and Amora, her gaze still fixed on Odin at the top of the grand staircase and her grip very gentle. "That's enough," she said quietly. Loki wanted to protest that he had been the only one *not* speaking over this important ceremony. But Frigga squeezed his shoulder, and he swallowed his words.

Another bolt of lightning leaped from Karnilla's hand to the surface of the Mirror, but this one was different. Loki felt a change in the air, a shift in the magic that made him shudder. His mother must have felt it too—her hand spasmed on his shoulder. Odin took an abrupt step back from the Mirror, one hand rising like he was trying to push something away. Then an audible cry escaped his lips. On the other side, Karnilla paused, hand still in the air with the threads of white light whirring in a hive around it.

Then Odin tore himself away from the Mirror, breaking the spell. The magic drained from his eye, leaving behind his dark iris flooded with panic. He stumbled, catching himself on the rail. There was a gasp from the assembled court. One of the Einherjar

reached out to Odin, but the king pushed him away, snatching back his staff and starting down the stairs at a tripping gait. He may have been trying to pull himself together, but he looked frayed. Karnilla let the spell die on her fingers, the light extinguished, before she stepped out from behind the Mirror and started down the opposite side of the stairs after Odin.

“Continue with the feast,” Odin instructed the captain standing in salute at the base of the stairs. “I’ll return shortly.” He paused, and his eye swiveled, first to Thor, then to Loki, the gaze heavy and meaningful in a way that made Loki’s skin crawl. Whatever vision his father had seen, Loki was suddenly certain in a way he couldn’t explain that they had been a part of it.

Odin ran a hand over his beard, then flicked his fingers at Frigga, motioning for her to follow. “My queen.” Loki felt his mother’s hand leave his shoulder as she followed Odin from the hall, Karnilla and his sentries on his heels. The doors of the Great Hall banged behind him, and noise flooded back into the room, this time pitched and anxious.

On either side of Loki, Amora and Thor were silent, staring after Odin. All thoughts of pink tiles that shifted colors beneath the feet of the court evaporated. Instead, Loki felt a cold pit settle in his stomach that he could not explain or banish. He had never seen

fear like that on his father’s face. If it even had been fear. That look had been so foreign it was impossible to recognize.

“What happened?” Thor asked at last.

“I think the question is,” Amora replied, “what did he see?”



Chapter Two

At the urging of the Einherjar captain whom Odin had flung leadership upon as he stumbled out, the feast was served in spite of the king's absence. The musicians began to play again, now in a minor key—or perhaps that was Loki's imagination. The energy in the hall had shifted into hushed whispers of speculation. Rumors were flying down the table before the first course had been cleared—Odin had seen his own death, he had seen Asgard surrender in battle, he had seen Ragnarok, the end of the world unfurling before him on that dark glass.

“Is Father coming back?” Thor asked for the fifth

time. He hadn't touched his meal but was using a knife to hack his vegetables into precise squares.

“When I find out, you'll be the first one I tell,” Loki replied dryly.

“I'm sure it's taking him a while to devise a lie to cover up whatever it was he actually saw,” Amora remarked across from him.

Thor glared at her. “Don't speak ill of my father.”

“Really? That's your first concern?”

“My father does not lie.”

“To be clear, was it him who told you that little tiara looked pretty on you?”

Thor's hand flew reflexively to his circlet. “No. I chose it myself.”

“Well, then.” Amora's lips skimmed the rim of her goblet. “Perhaps his record is clean.”

“He will not lie to his people,” Thor protested, thumbing the edge of his circlet. Loki could tell he was debating whether or not to remove it. “If what he saw concerns all of Asgard, he will tell the court.”

“And everyone knows the first step to telling your assembled court something important is to flee the room in which they're all assembled, waiting for you to speak.”

Thor's jaw set, and he turned his glare to Loki. “Do

you always tolerate her speaking like this? It's nearly treasonous."

"Aw." Amora frowned in mock disappointment. "Only *nearly*?"

Loki wanted to clap his hands over his ears and shut them both out. He couldn't stop thinking about the look on his father's face, his stumble down the stairs, the way he had surveyed his sons.

"Loki," Thor said again, and Loki couldn't stand it a moment longer.

He tossed his napkin onto the table and pushed his chair back. "I need some air."

Amora stood. "I'll come with you."

"I need some air *alone*," he said, and she froze, half standing. It may have been the first time he had denied her anything.

Loki slipped unnoticed from the hall using the servants' entrance he and Thor had discovered as children, hidden behind a tapestry of Valkyries extending their hands to the Asgardian warriors they were shepherding off the battlefield to Valhalla. Both the long-necked Valkyries and the broad-shouldered warriors had been the source of rather critical stirrings in his youth, but tonight Loki ignored the images as he ducked behind the tapestry and down the passageway it hid.

Amora had taught him more magic in the months she'd been at court than he had learned in his entire lifetime. Part of her tutelage had been lessons in what she knew about using magic to shift his form. He was still learning to mimic the finer details of Asgardian features, but this disguise did not need to be precise to be effective. The uniform of the kitchen staff would be the most critical thing to get correct, and as soon as he had the dress on his form, made in imitation of two kitchen girls who scuttled by him with their eyes downcast, his body shifted to fit it. He snagged a tray of empty goblets from a table in the passageway and ran them hastily under a keg at the end of the hall.

The form of a servant girl bringing the king and queen refreshment made him invisible in the hallways as he edged toward his father's chambers. He was almost certain that's where Odin would have fled with Karnilla and Frigga. Once he was in the room, the servant girl would likely go unnoticed enough to eavesdrop—certainly less noticed than a snake, which had been his initial plan, and which was easier to imitate than an Asgardian. But snakes tended to garner attention—Thor would pick up any serpent to admire it.

Loki opened the door to his father's chambers, only to find the staffs of the two Einherjar guarding the door crossed before him, barring his way. He pulled up

short, nearly spilling his drinks in surprise. Behind the Einherjar, Loki could see his father perched on a couch in the antechamber, his back to the door, Frigga at his side. “Leave us!” he barked without turning around.

“I was sent from the kitchens, Your Majesty,” Loki said, trying to pitch his voice into something girlish. His vocals still needed work. “To bring you refreshment.”

“We require nothing from the kitchen,” Odin snapped.

Frigga glanced over her shoulder at Loki, and he felt his face heat, though if she recognized her son, she gave no indication. “Return to the feast,” she said gently. “You’ll be summoned if we require anything.”

Loki bowed, the long, loose tresses that all the servant girls wore immediately falling over his shoulder and dunking into the goblets he had brought. “I’ll just leave them.”

He could feel the eyes of the two Einherjar sentries as he slid the tray onto a table beside the door, metal scraping metal with a cringing shriek that somehow made the silence that had fallen the moment he entered even more apparent.

Loki offered the guards a shy smile, then, as though he had just noticed, said, “Oh, I brought too many.”

As he reached for the fourth glass, he cast the spell. He had never been especially proficient at two-way

communication charms, though he had read they came in many varieties. The only version he knew was the one he had devised when he was young—he used a charm to connect a pot of rouge on his mother’s dressing table to an inkwell in his own chambers so that he could listen to her discuss the gifts she’d be giving for that year’s Solstice. For some reason he could no longer recall, it had felt absolutely essential to know what she was giving him. The spell had unraveled quickly, partly because he still had a tenuous grip on his own power, and because his and Frigga’s chambers were on opposite sides of the castle, and any spell was hard to sustain over a distance. And partly because the spell ran both ways, and Frigga had noticed the talking rouge pot right away.

But now he had a slightly less tenuous grip on his own magic, and when his fingers met the stem of the goblet, he felt the spell stick. It felt so good to feel a spell land that way, like the teeth of two gears locking together and moving each other. From the couch, he thought he saw his mother stiffen, like she had felt the prickle in the air, but before she could turn, he picked up the fourth goblet, dipped a quick curtsy to the Einherjar, then fled the room.

As soon as the door shut behind him, he ducked around the corner. He chugged the contents of the goblet—it made him light-headed, but he was determined

to empty it as quickly as possible—before pressing it to his ear. It took a moment—the speech crackled, dipping in and out. The mug he had enchanted to connect to was still full, so it sounded as if he were underwater, listening to someone above the surface. He could barely make out his mother’s words: “You don’t know that.”

“I saw him,” he heard Odin reply. “Leading an army.”

“That does not mean Ragnarok.”

“Then what does it mean? What other cause—?”

Someone grabbed Loki’s shoulder and he nearly dropped the goblet. He whipped around, the hilt of the dagger he kept up his sleeve sliding into his free hand.

Thor was standing behind him, arms crossed. “What are you doing?”

Loki, still in the servant girl’s form, bowed, attempting to subtly tuck the knife into the folds of his skirt. “Apologies, my lord, I was simply bringing the king—”

“You can cease with the theatrics, brother,” Thor interrupted. “I know it’s you.”

“Brother?” Loki repeated, letting his bow sink so low he could have licked the floor. “What brother is this that you speak of?”

Thor grabbed him around the wrist and held up his hand in between them, still clutching the knife. Loki scowled, then let the disguise drop. He pressed the

goblet against his side, muffling any of their conversation that might leak through into his father’s chambers.

“Are you spying?” Thor demanded.

“Doesn’t *spying* imply some sort of visual component?”

“Then you’re dropping eaves.”

“Yes, that sounds much more refined.” When Thor continued to glare at him, Loki sighed. “I want to know what Father saw.”

“If it is our concern, he will enlighten us in time.”

“If it’s our concern, I’m almost certain he won’t. You saw his face. The way he fled. He was expecting to see a threat to Asgard in that Mirror—what must it have been to rattle him like that?” Thor bit his lip, glancing down at the goblet. “I don’t want to hear the rosy version he will present to the court. I want the truth.”

“I trust he will give it to us,” Thor replied.

“Fine. I hope your trust keeps you warm.” He twisted his wrist out of Thor’s grasp, pulling down his sleeve to cover the red streaks even his brother’s mild grip had left on his pale skin, and started to lift the goblet to his ear, but Thor tugged at the back of his tunic.

“Loki. Don’t.”

“If you don’t want to stay, begone,” Loki replied, wiggling his fingers at Thor like he was flicking a piece of dust from his lapel. “No one’s forcing you to stoop so low as dropping eaves.”

He pressed the goblet to his ear, but before he could catch the conversation again, Thor leaned next to him, pulling the goblet so that it cupped both of their ears. Loki resisted a smirk. They pressed their foreheads together, straining to hear, and Loki thought how ridiculous they would look to anyone who happened to pass this way, the two Asgardian princes, huddled and intent over an empty feast goblet.

A third voice—Karnilla’s—had joined those of their parents. “—not weapons. They are amplifiers of strength. You can’t think his power, even amplified, would be enough to end your realm.”

“I do not know what he is capable of,” Odin replied. “That is what frightens me.”

“Stop breathing so loud,” Loki hissed to Thor. His brother was huffing like he was trying to put out a fire.

“This is how I breathe,” Thor replied.

“Then stop breathing,” Loki said through gritted teeth. “They can hear us too, you know.”

“Then stop talking,” Thor scolded, loud enough that Loki threw a hand over the mouth of the goblet. He glanced behind him to his father’s chamber door, waiting to see if it would open, if one of the Einherjar would be sent to investigate the source of the mysterious goblet arguing with itself.

Nothing happened.

Loki raised the goblet again, and Thor made a show of taking a deep breath without chuffing, and they both leaned in.

“Perhaps the Mirror was wrong,” Frigga was saying. “You said it yourself in the Great Hall—there is no certainty in any vision of the future, even one offered by powerful magic.”

“It has never been wrong, in the history of our people,” Odin replied. “Perhaps it could be, or perhaps that is simply something the kings have always said to protect their choices, but it never has been wrong. Everything a king of Asgard has seen in the Godseye Mirror has come to pass. It alerted me to the impending war with the Frost Giants. We survived that conflict only because of the increased fortifications we built in preparation. It’s a tool of warning, not of flighty predictions that might perhaps come to pass. If the Mirror shows him leading an army of the living dead against our people, then that is the threat we must prepare for.”

“You do not need to raise your voice to me,” Frigga said, and Loki realized his father must have been shouting. It was hard to tell through the mead. “How do you propose we prepare for this threat? Would you have him punished because of something he may do wrong in the future? You’d have to lock up your whole court if that were the standard for imprisonment.”

There was a pause, so long that Loki was concerned his spell had fallen apart, but then he heard Karnilla say, “We will increase the protections around the Norn Stones.”

“That’s not enough,” Odin replied.

“The loss of the Stones would not—” Frigga began, but his father interrupted.

“The Norn Stones in the wrong hands could mean the end of Asgard.”

“And you think those wrong hands belong to our son?” Frigga asked.

Silence. Loki felt his pulse throbbing, so loud he wasn’t sure he’d be able to hear his father over it when he spoke again. His chest suddenly felt corked and impossible to breathe through. Beside him, Thor stiffened, his shoulders rising into a stance that Loki knew from facing him in the sparring ring. Thor was ready to fight, though what for, he wasn’t sure yet.

Say it, Loki thought. Say which of your sons will lead an army against Asgard. Which of us will be the one on the wrong side of Ragnarok.

“We should return to the feast,” Frigga said at last. “Your people will be looking to their king for guidance. And an explanation for your abrupt exit. Not for news of the end of the world.”

Loki felt Thor grab him by the back of the tunic and tug him down the hallway, away from their father’s chambers and through an open doorway, out of sight. The goblet fell from his hand, clattering to the tile.

Thor had dragged them into a chapel dedicated to the All-Mothers, the one Odin used to offer prayers alone before battle. It was small, and the golden light spilling through the windows made the wooden vaults look syrupy and warm. Along the beams were carved scenes of the serpent’s rampage and the All-Mothers ascending to their thrones, the varnish old and seeping so that the edges looked dewy.

Thor sank down on one of the carved benches, in front of a mural of Gaea the Compassionate with her arms at her sides, hands turned out. Loki took the spot across the aisle from him, the hard angle of the bench making his back ache almost instantly. Thor sank into a slump, hands pressed into his forehead, but Loki sat rigid, staring at Gaea, the tip of her chin, the lowered eyes, her thin lips parted in supplication.

Thor spoke first. “Father saw one of us leading an army against Asgard.”

“Yes, I remember,” Loki replied, still staring at Gaea. “I was there, you know.”

“One of us—”

“I believe the phrase was one of his *sons*, so perhaps the real question is does Odin have a secret family hidden in a palace tower plotting to slit our throats?”

Thor sat up, crossing his arms as he swiveled to face Loki across the aisle. “You wish to argue semantics with me, brother?”

“Only if you can spell *semantics*.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Loki replied, still staring at Gaea’s hands. Penitent. Submissive. Weak. “It might bring on the end of the world.”

Thor slammed his fist against the back of the bench in front of him, and it jumped, clattering against the stone floor. “Is this all a jest to you?”

Loki flicked his eyes across the aisle to Thor. “I think the very fact that you’re so concerned proves that you’re not the one who will be leading the army.”

“What do you mean?” Thor asked.

“I think that if you were to take a poll of random Asgardians and ask them which of us was more likely to rebel against his father, I’d win with flying colors.” Loki laughed hollowly, brushing a splinter from the pew off his trousers. “Perhaps the first contest I’ll ever best you in.”

“And that doesn’t concern you?” Thor asked.

Loki shrugged. “Well, now that I know what father’s

seen, if I ever find myself standing at the head of an army, I will stop, reconsider, and, oh, you know, not do that.”

“But what if in trying to stop it you make it come to pass?” Thor asked.

Loki frowned. “You think what father saw is inevitable?”

“The Godseye Mirror has never been wrong in the history of Asgard,” Thor replied. “It warns of dangers to come. They always come.” He turned abruptly forward again, pressing his fist to his forehead, then pivoted back to Loki. “Perhaps father doesn’t know which of us it is.”

“We *are* so very easy to mistake for each other,” Loki said. “Perhaps I’m wrong—leading an army does sound much more like you. I prefer to be on the sidelines with a snack.” He tapped his heel against the floor of the aisle. “And I would never risk these boots in battle.”

Thor pressed his elbows to his knees, his head dropping against his clenched hands. “Does this truly matter so little to you?” His voice was softer than Loki was accustomed to hearing it, and it stilled him.

“Nothing is little to me,” Loki replied, then stood, his heel catching in a rut between two stones.

“Where are you going?” Thor called after him as he righted himself and started down the aisle.

“I need to talk to Amora.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea right now?” Thor asked.

Loki paused, nearly at the door, and considered pretending he hadn’t heard. Thor was trying to provoke him. To get him to turn back. And he always tried his best not to give his brother what he wanted.

But he turned. Thor had stood too, one hand resting on the end of the pew.

“What do you mean by that?” Loki demanded.

Thor’s gaze flicked down to the stone, then back to Loki. “I don’t think she’s a good influence upon you.”

“Say that again, but this time cover one eye, and I’d swear you were Father.”

“I’m not jesting.”

“No, I’m sure you’re not.” He tried to keep his voice even, but the sting gave his words a hard edge. It wasn’t like he had many options for friends. Thor and his fellow warriors-in-training had made it clear they didn’t want anything to do with Loki, like his lack of muscle mass might be catching if they stood too close. “You’re just jealous,” he countered, though even as the words left his mouth, he knew how silly they sounded. How desperate.

“Jealous of what?” Thor asked.

“I don’t know, but I’ll think of something.” He should have left then, but instead he took a step back into the chapel, toward Thor. “It’s none of your concern whom I pass my days with.”

“Of course it is,” Thor replied. “You’re my brother.”

“Then should I be concerned about all your long nights in the sparring ring with Sif?” Loki challenged.

Thor’s cheeks colored. “That’s different. She’s helping me with my . . .”

“Your what?” Loki cocked his eyebrow, a gesture he would never admit to Thor that he had practiced in front of the mirror in his chambers for hours to ensure he could execute it perfectly when needed. “Flexibility?”

“And what is Amora helping you with?” Thor snapped. “Teaching you how to be a witch like she is?”

“She’s not a witch,” Loki snapped. “She’s a sorceress. She’ll be the royal sorceress someday.”

Thor snorted. “When I’m king, she’ll never be allowed anywhere near the court.”

Loki crossed his arms. “*When* you’re king, is it?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“But it’s what you said.”

“Fine, perhaps I did mean it,” Thor said, his voice taking on a growl. “If you continue to keep company with her, perhaps there won’t be a spot for you either.”

“Is that meant to be a threat?” Loki asked. “If so, you might try and make it a little less tantalizing. Who says I want a place in the court of a king who hits himself in the face with his own hammer?”

“That was one time!”

“And yet it’s burned in our hearts forever.”

“At least I’ll be on the right side when Ragnarok comes!” Thor burst out. “At least I’ll fight for Asgard and not against it.”

Loki sucked in his cheeks, trying not to let his sinking heart make itself known upon his face. They had both suspected it was him, but he hadn’t thought Thor would say it. He felt himself darken when he looked at Thor, like something cooking on a high heat. His brother’s face was set, but his eyes brimmed with regret.

“Perhaps the Mirror was wrong,” Loki said quietly.

“It’s never wrong,” Thor replied.

“You say that like the future is an inevitable, unchangeable thing. What if you stabbed me right now and killed me before the end of the world? Couldn’t fulfill my traitorous destiny then, could I?”

“Please don’t be angry at me.”

“I’m not angry.”

“You’re shouting.”

“I’m not . . .” Loki stopped, realizing suddenly that his voice had echoed off the vaulted ceilings of the

chapel. He turned back to the door, fumbling for the latch. “Happy feast day, brother.”

“Loki, wait—”

He heard Thor’s heavy footsteps, felt him reach for his arm, but Loki twisted from his grasp. His heart was pounding, but he managed to keep his voice steady and less biting than he wanted it to be. “Best stay away from me. We’re going to be enemies at the end of the world.”

He had expected Thor to protest. Make the same excuses he always did. But Thor stayed silent, and Loki felt something dark and cold begin to curl inside him.

Of course Thor assumed he would be the one on the right side at the end of the world. Of course he would lead the forces of good for Asgard. Loki’s brother was born to be a king—the whole court knew it. Anyone who looked at him knew it. The gods could not have handcrafted a more obvious model of kingship than Thor—blond and broad and fast and strong without trying. Loki was the scraps of his silhouette, the part that was discarded on the workshop floor to be swept up and tossed into the fire—thin and pale, with a hooked nose and black hair that hung flat to the nape of his neck, where it flipped into an unflattering curl. While Thor’s skin bronzed in the sun so that he seemed made of armor, Loki was pale as milk, and soured just as easily.

Chapter Two

And whoever wasn't king was the traitor—wasn't that how it would work? Spurned and rejected by his father, the disfavored son would rise up at the end of Asgard.

But he was a son of Asgard. A prince. He wasn't a traitor. He wouldn't lead an army against his own brother. His own people.

Would he?