



**TRANSFIGURED
ASCENSION OF A
SPELLBINDER**

BY

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**RAGNAROK
RISING**

PART TWO

Transfigured: Ascension of a Spellbinder (revised version)

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

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Author's Note:

This version of 'Transfigured' has been rewritten and is my preferred version of the story. For this reason I am giving this version a slightly different subtitle to help separate this version from the original.

This story is a continuation of the events depicted in Incompatible. It is necessary (and not recommend as I originally stated) that you read "Incompatible: Birth of A Spellbinder" before reading this. Originally, It was my intention for Derek, a new character introduced in this story, to be the Protagonist, but as the story progressed and I began to rethink things, he took a back seat to Aryanna. That is not to say his role in the story is in anyway insignificant.

The original version of this story shifted between three narrators and the results left much to be desired. So I have rewritten the story with Aryanna as the sole narrator. Besides narrating her own portion of the story, she also narrates both Flint and Derek's stories.

Thanks go out to Beyogi, Maggie Finson, The Rev. Anam Chara, & Holly H Hart for all the help.

NOTE: This is the revised and expanded version of this story and is my preferred edition.



PART 1

Before we met, Derek Hines lived a more or less quiet life as a desk jockey in a small office building in his hometown of Epegard. He had no aspirations for power or greed, all he ever wished was to stand on an equal footing with women. He would soon get his wish, but not in the way he had ever intended.

As days went, this one was altogether average for Derek. He had almost finished up his work, when Linnea, his boss, stepped into his small basement office. He had come to loathe the sight of the woman, and from his descriptions of her I don't blame him. Linnea was an extremely attractive woman who greeted Derek with an all too familiar malevolent smile. "Derek," she said with pouting lips and traced a well-manicured finger across Derek's desk.

Linnea seemed to enjoy dumping outrageous piles of work on Derek's desk and he knew with a sinking feeling that she was about to do it again. In spite of his hatred of the woman, he was no less affected by her feminine wiles. Though she was quick to utilize her looks to get her way, she had proven just as formidable wherever her looks were not suited to the task. She had destroyed the careers of countless rivals by backstabbing her way to her current position. "It looks like the Nanette is going to need that analysis report by Manadag. I have far too much work on my plate. Do you think you get that done for me?"

Derek flashed her a nervous smile, "S-sure thing, Linn. I'll get right on it."

"Thanks, Derek," she said. "You're the best."

"No weekend for you," a voice familiar to Derek said a few moments later.

"Ayele," Derek replied irritably. "I really don't have time right now."

As his attention returned back to his work, a small paper flyer appeared atop the paper he had been working on. "Check this out, man."

Derek briefly glanced at the flyer, tossed it casually aside then turned back to his work. Ayele let out a grunt of protest, "Come on man. You're the one always going on about men's rights. I thought maybe you'd be interested."

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Ayele, like Derek, was of African descent and cut an imposing figure, standing nearly six and a half feet tall. Derek asked, "What on Midgard are you talking about?"

Ayele rolled his eyes, "The flyer man, the Sons of Odin are having a rally tonight."

Derek scowled up at Ayele, "Another men's rights group? No thanks. They're all alike. Full of nothing but angry rhetoric and empty promises."

"You're hopeless, man. You say you want equal rights, but you ain't never gonna do anything about it." He shook his head, turned his back and left Derek alone with his thoughts.

Absently, Derek picked up the flyer and read through it. Eventually he went back to work, but as the day wore on he kept hearing Ayele's words echo in his head.



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

Naturally, Derek wasn't fooled. Like me, he believed that violence is not the path to equality, but to hatred and, sadly, more violence. He had come to the rally against his better judgment and now found himself wishing he had stayed away. This group seemed more interested in spewing out hate-filled venom than they did in making a difference. There had to be a better way. If men reduced themselves to that level, how were they any better than the Spellbinders believed them to be? How could they gain equality by proving their oppressors right?

Having heard enough, Derek turned his back and started working his way away from the crowd. Just as he had nearly gained the exit to the pavilion, the man on stage called out. "Brother! Why are you leaving? Don't you wish to cast off the shackles of oppression?"

Filled with righteous indignation, Derek swirled around and found the crowd facing him. "Hatred and violence won't solve our problem, brother," he said between clenched teeth, putting particular emphasis on the last word and stepped out of the pavilion and into the night.

Wary after listening to the hate-filled ramblings of the man on stage, Derek was ready to return to his home in Epegard. He made his way through the parking lot, then stopped just a few steamcars short of his battered old NMC Vision. Two men were waiting at the car and they didn't look particularly friendly.

He recognized immediately that they were there for him, and he quickly ducked behind a nearby Ford Pygmy, but his efforts were in vain, as they had spotted him. He soon found himself surrounded on either side. The shorter of the two, a burly man with a goatee, drew close and grabbed the collar of Derek's shirt, "Well, well, look what we have here, Vili." There was a malicious glint in his eyes. "Someone has decided to leave the party early."

The other man, obviously Vili, came up beside Derek and palmed the top of Derek's head with his

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hand, "You think the boss'll like this one, Jakob?"

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

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



PART 2

Death and destruction rained all around him as he watched those under his command die at the hands of the enemy. Firing his assault rifle wildly into the air around him, he hoped that he could at least take another one those bitch fire mages down with him. When a huge fire erupted in front of him, he had just enough time to leap out of the way as it consumed the area he had just vacated.

He fired more rounds and used up the remainder of his ammunition as the fiery onslaught continued. Throwing his rifle to the ground, he drew the combat knife from its sheath at his waist and tossed it deftly at the nearest target. There was a cold sense of satisfaction as the blade struck his target in the throat. She fell to the ground with dull lifeless eyes.

Cold chills ran down his spine as an inhuman howl rang through the clearing. He whirled around just as a huge fireball came careening toward him...



With a start, Nicholas Flint came awake. Like Derek, his day was getting off to a very average start. You see, Flint had the same dream every night. Each night he relived the battle at Tyr's Dike. The battle was in his past, and he had no desire to relive it. Nevertheless, every night he did just that. The images just as vivid and horrifying as ever.

He alone had survived of his entire platoon. All his men had died at the hands of three fire mages. He once confided in me that a single Spellbinder would have been sufficient to suppress the mages and he had requested the use of one. Command had felt that it was an unnecessary use of resources and had denied his request. The results had been catastrophic for both his men and himself, the only survivor. After the fireball hit him, he was severely wounded and left for dead.

Over a week after the confrontation he woke in an army hospital, nearly healed of all injury. His left knee had been so badly damaged, the army healers had not been able to completely repair the tissue., so he would walk with a severe limp for years to come. Despite the death-toll on his platoon,

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the mission had proved successful, and the battle had succeeded in taking down the leader of the resistance in their surprise attack.

After Flint was healed he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, a largely honorary rank, and awarded all sorts of medals and paraded around as a hero in front of the entire nation.

Later, he learned from other soldiers of the horrors they had witnessed in battle. The enemy had not been fighting for power or greed. They had been fighting because their people were starving, and the Spellbinders ruling over them had sat idly by and done nothing.

After everything he had done, the Army turned their back on him. Because of the damage to Flint's leg he was no longer able to serve and was discharged from the service. He had given up years of life to his country in a cause that he no longer believe in. Bitter, angry and penniless, he wandered from place to place and from job to job, never staying very long and never making friends.

It wasn't until he met Jonas Talman that he began to believe in something again. In him he had found a new sense of purpose. Talman was a revolutionary who believed that the only way for men to have freedom was to take it by force. After what he had seen, he was quick to agree, and eagerly joined the Sons of Odin.

When he first joined the resistance they had still been a very small group, and Flint quickly became one of Talman's top lieutenants. As the Sons of Odin grew in number, Talman made alliances with powerful figures in the government and even managed to persuade some of them to join the cause.

It wasn't until the De Clissons entered the picture that Flint began to have doubts. Jeanne had seemed receptive to helping them, but she had been in a position of power for centuries and he suspected she had ulterior motives for helping the resistance.

It took years to find any evidence of her duplicity, and it very nearly cost Flint his life. He had been working as a low level manager for a business firm owned by a powerful Spellbinder family as a means to gain information for the resistance when he discovered a discrepancy in the firm's accounting. They had been funneling funds to an offshore bank, to an account that belonged to, you guessed it, Jeanne de Clisson.

When Flint confronted her she would have killed him if it hadn't been for the interference of a security guard. Yes, that was me. I had blundered into the little meeting and it was then that my magic awakened, and by sheer dumb luck I was able to defeat Jeanne de Clisson.

Flint managed to escape police imprisonment and made his way back to Talman. He confronted him with the information he had found and was shocked when Talman chose to continue the alliance with House de Clisson.

Before her death, Jeanne had concocted a scheme to place assassins within all the major Spellbinder houses in order to cripple the Seidskati. Olivia, obsessed with revenge, kidnapped me in order to enact her mother's plans. Again, against all odds, I managed to overcome Olivia.

Controversy arose, House de Clisson fell out of favor among the Seidskati, and the alliance with the Spellbinder's house fell to pieces.

Sighing warily, and wincing against the pain in his bad knee, Flint walked across the room to his small wardrobe and quickly dressed himself. He threw open the door to his room, pause briefly in

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the doorway and left in search of Talman with a determined stride in his steps.



"Dammit, Jonas," Flint spat angrily. "We don't need Mengele. What good will come from an alliance with that creature?"

Talman smiled reassuringly, "Nick, Mengele promises to grant men the ability to use magic. Isn't that a worthy cause? Can you image the momentum the resistance would gain if word got out that we had magic users in our midst? How long do you think the Seidskati could continue to deny us an equal footing after that?"

Flint shook his head, "Mengele has been trying to perfect that formula of his for over fifty years. You can't honestly believe that he'll succeed."

Talman smiled again. "Trust me, Nick. Mengele will prove to be a boon to our cause. After he's succeeded in perfecting the formula, men will flock to us in droves and victory will be assured."

"I guess I'll just have to trust in you," Flint said, restraining himself from voicing any more concerns. He didn't trust Mengele, but clearly Talman knew more than he did. Maybe Mengele could deliver.

Talman nodded, "I need you to watch over things here for a few days. I have some business to take care of in Fairfield. We'll talk more when I get back. I'll be leaving after speaking with Mengele."

"Very well," Flint said to his fellow revolutionary letting the matter drop.



PART 3

"Finally," a voice said out of the fog as Derek sat up with a loud groan. He found himself within a holding cell, an older man standing over him.

"Easy there," said the man in a voice that I do not doubt Derek felt reassuring. He had a mane of wild white hair and a long unkempt beard which granted him the appearance of a beggar. "You're not in any immediate danger." He smiled down at the younger man and something about the old man made Derek think he could be trusted.

His head was throbbing painfully. As Derek ran his hand through his short-cropped black hair he felt a sharp twinge of pain as his hand passed over the back of his head, "Where am I?" he mumbled warily.

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

"What is this place?" Derek asked.

The oldster frowned and stroked the end of his beard, "Norns if I know! You'd need to ask one of them sumbitch Sons of Odin who locked us up."

"The Sons of Odin," Derek breathed warily. "Those two thugs who attacked me after the rally." Scrambling to his feet he turned to face the oldster. "What do they want with us?"

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

"Derek Hines. Yours?"

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

"No," Derek agreed.

Derek didn't particularly feel up to talking. Perhaps Monty sensed this as he soon fell silent.

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Suddenly feeling very restless, Derek looked about the room, examining his surroundings more closely. The cell had a single barred door and was set within a slightly larger room with a solid steel door leading outside. The only source of light was a single electric torch which didn't shed nearly as much light as he would have liked. Doubting he would find any means of escape, a deep and pervading hopelessness settled over him. Nevertheless, he tested the cell bars and door, but neither showed any sign of weakness.

Finally giving up, he sank dejectedly to the floor and waited for something, anything, to happen. Hours dragged by and the two prisoners passed time by sharing tales of their pasts. As Derek later related to me, Monty proved to be a far more adept story teller and regaled Derek with tales of his youth spent in North Bannock, and his many travels across the country. He knew how to weave a good story, but Derek doubted that much, if any of his story, was the truth.

After a few hours, a man appeared and gave them each a tray of food. He didn't say anything and Derek couldn't get a response out of him, even after issuing a number of insults. He did note the guard waiting outside the door as the man left. Hours crawled by, and as they turned into days, Derek and Monty were joined by three more men, none of whom knew any more than they did.

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

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



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

Derek resisted the urge to open his eyes and look about. Instead, he kept himself complete immobile, not wishing for his captors to know he was awake. "What about the others, doctor?" asked a booming male voice.

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

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

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

He snapped his eyes open and was momentarily blinded by bright light. Once his eyes adjusted to the brightness he was assaulted with the strangest sight he had ever laid his eyes upon. A bizarre amalgamation of man and woman stood before Derek. He looked as if someone had split a man and a woman in half from the head down then joined a half from each into a single person. The male side looked scarred, contorted and twisted out of shape, while the female side was the model

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of feminine beauty.

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

The creature stepped closer to where Derek lay and he noticed that his female side was shorter than the male side which caused him to walk with a sort of strange hobbling motion. "Good," Dr. Mengele spoke, smiling blissfully. "Rolph remembered the restraints this time."

Tilting his head, Derek noted the straps about his wrists. He tried to move his legs, but it seemed they too were strapped to the table atop which he lay. "Exactly what do you intend to do with me?"

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

Derek gulped nervously and watched as the doctor continued on his mad tirade, "For fifty years we have tried to perfect our formula. Sometime we think we are so close that we can taste it upon the tip of our tongue."

Derek struggled in his bindings, but to no avail, they were too tight. Chortling madly the doctor picked a syringe up from a nearby table, "Try as you might, you won't get free."

He plunged the syringe into Derek's arm, and once more he drifted into unconsciousness.



PART 4

A familiar cold hard anger flooded through Flint as he looked over the scene before him. Mengele had gone too far. Flint would not let that creature experiment on innocent civilians. Pulling his P426 from its holster Flint grabbed the doctor by the cuff of his collar. "What do you think you're doing, Mengele?" Flint growled between clenched teeth.

Mengele threw his head back and started laughing like the madman that Flint new him to be, "We need to test our new formula."

Trembling with rage, Flint barely managed to keep himself from pulling the trigger, "You've got lots of nerve. Talman would never approve of this."

Mengele smiled, "Talman provided us with the test subjects."

Throwing Mengele to the floor, Flint aimed his pistol at the Doctor's head, "Release the captives, now!"

"They have already been injected with the formula," the doctor shrieked. "We must observe them."

"Sir," Rolph interjected. "He's telling the truth. This has all been done with Talman's approval."

Flint re-holstered his gun and turned to Rolph, who had been guarding the room under Talman's orders, and scowled. "I hope for your sake you're telling the truth," he said, then turned his back and swept out of the room without another word to either Mengele or Rolph.



I could feel the earth magic trickle down my arm and into my fist as she stared down at me angrily. Claramae and I didn't care for one another. She didn't particularly like taking orders from someone more than one-hundred years her junior. Since Athilda had fallen ill I had gradually taken on more responsibility as her heir. Whatever I tried to do as acting head of House le Fey was met with stark

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resistance by my cousins. They saw me as a young interloper who had somehow managed to charm Athilda into naming me heir. I really didn't want any of it, but I didn't have much choice. I needed every resource I could use if I were to prevent Ragnarok from becoming a reality.

She swung her fist at me, but I was too fast. I quickly brought my hands up and sent a huge gust of wind magic at the older woman, who soared nearly fifteen feet before landing gracelessly on her ass. Few Spellbinders were as powerful or as skilled with wind magic as I was, and I found it an effective means of defending myself.

Calmly I walked over to where my underling now lay in a rather awkward heap and stared down at her. "When I tell you to do something, Clara, you do it. You got it?" I said coldly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

The doctor loosened the straps on his wrists and Derek looked at him uncertainly, "What's going

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on?"

"Did you not hear us!?" he growled at Derek angrily. "The Seidskati have found us. You've been injected with the revised formula. We must escape, or all our work will be for naught."

Extricating his hands and legs from the straps, Derek hopped off the table and advanced on the doctor, "They've coming for you, not me."

The doctor chortled and spoke with an insane gleam in his eyes, "You think they will take kindly to a man who can use magic? Better if you come with us. We can monitor your progress and assure there aren't any unforeseen side effects."

Nodding as if what the doctor said was perfectly reasonable Derek moved as if to follow Mengele. "You're right," he said. "Let's get out of here."

As the doctor turned to leave, Derek quickly grabbed a tray from a nearby table, swept the instruments off it and slammed it into the back of Mengele's head, or at least tried too. The doctor ducked just in time to dodge Derek's attack. Then, with incredible strength Derek did not know the doctor possessed, he forced the tray from his grip. Before Derek could even think to defend himself the doctor raised the tray and once again Derek fell into unconsciousness.



PART 5

Flint nearly fell to the floor as his bad knee buckled under the pressure. For several moments the building shook and trembled as if it were being torn apart. Instinctively, Nick knew magic was at work, and that could mean only one thing, the Sons of Odin were under attack. Soon the sound of gunfire erupted from outside the compound and his fears were confirmed. Barely able to stand, let alone run, he took off down the hall, passing several men in the hallways and ordered all of them to follow.

Quickly he guided the men to the nearest weapons cache, located in the main meeting hall, where they quickly armed ourselves. Another explosive jolt rocked the compound, and Flint nearly fell to the floor as his knee groaned in protest. Gritting his teeth he waited out the blast. Before he could open his mouth to issue orders, a figure stepped into the hall to face the revolutionary and his men.



"Hold your fire!" Flint bellowed as his men raised their weapons.

Gritting his teeth against the pain Flint limped toward where I stood and came to stand across from me.

"You," I muttered as my eyes widening in recognition. "You're Talman?"

Flint smiled, "No. The name's Nick Flint. I would say it's a pleasure to see you again, but I hardly think these are pleasurable circumstances."

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

"You saved my life. That's not something I'm likely to forget. If you surrender, I promise no harm will come to you," he said, likely knowing full well that his men didn't stand a chance against a powerful Spellbinder like myself.

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Smiling ruefully I shook my head, "You know I can't do that."

"Had to ask. May your journey to Valhalla be swift and assured." He turned his back to me and walked back to where his men waited. "Men! Open Fire!" Flint called out.

Bright flashes of light appeared as a barrage of bullets flew my way. I raised my arms and called forth a shield of spirit magic, watching calmly as the bullets bounced harmlessly off the soft blue barrier. Having no desire to kill Nicholas nor his men, I reached deep within myself and wove a web of wind, water and spirit magic and sent it hurtling throughout the room. A swirling green mass appeared above them and quickly consumed Flint and his men. When all was said and done a full dozen men lay on the ground unconscious, with only minor injuries.

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



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

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

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

"What sort of experiments?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

I moved closer to the old man and began to weave a spell of healing as I reached into the deepest recesses of his body. My magic came up against a barrier. I was so taken aback that I jumped back from the old man, falling down on my ass. Magic! The old man's body had instinctively summoned a magic barrier against my perceived intrusion.

"Dammit," I muttered angrily, preparing myself for another attempt. The old man lightly touched my hand. "Doctor Mengele," he said with a gasp. I tried to silence him but he shook his head

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stubbornly, "You must..." He gave one final gasp and a moment later he was gone.



PART 6

"Good, you are awake," the doctor cackled as Derek's eyes fluttered open.

Derek tried to move, but found his movements hindered by the shackles that were now around his wrists and ankles. "We are most disappointed in you," the doctor said frowning down at Derek. "We trusted you, and you attacked us."

Derek remained silent, staring defiantly up at the doctor as he continued to speak, "You have started to awaken."

"Awaken how?" Derek demanded.

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

Feelings of despair and hopelessness overtook him. Although the circumstances were much different I've been in a situation similar to Derek's, and it's not a pleasant experience, let me tell you. As Derek sat there alone he had plenty of time to think and memories of his past came flooding into his mind unbidden ...



Red fluid seeped through young Derek's clenched fingers as he tried in vain to keep the blood from pouring out of his father's chest. He had watched helplessly as the three armed men had walked into the small meat market and demanded all of the store's cash from his father.

"Derek, run!" his father called out as the bullets had started to fly. Derek dove to the floor.

The robbers ignored him completely as they tore the money-cabinet open with a crowbar and quickly made their escape with all of his father's hard-earned money.

Fearful that the thieves might return and decide to kill him, Derek crawled across the blood soaked floor and came to

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rest beside his father. Zeik Hines' chest rose and fell, and for a few fleeting moments Derek felt hope rise that his father would survive. Unfortunately, as his father's breathing grew steadily weaker and blood continued to flow from his body, Derek's worst fears were realized as his father took one final breath and passed into the next life.



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

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

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

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

I smiled, "There are ways around that."

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

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

I sighed, "I saved your life, remember? This is much bigger than either of us. If you knew what I know, you'd realize that there is much more at stake than men's rights."

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

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

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

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

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

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



PART 7

Derek stared down at his finger tips, aghast at the change that had been wrought upon them. A few moments ago his right hand had burst into sudden and excruciating pain. His finger tips felt as if they had been run through a meat grinder. In the dim light he brought his hand up to his face so that he could get a better look at it and watched in morbid horror as the tips of his fingers shrank, changing from their usual chocolate brown to a much lighter tan color. Slowly the changes crept up his fingers, stopping just short of his knuckles.

He was changing, that much was obvious, but into what? His fingers were now longer, resembling fingers that might belong to a woman. Chilled by the thought, Derek worried that he might end up resembling the doctor. Perhaps he would not be stuck between forms as the doctor had. Perhaps he would change into a complete woman, but that held little more appeal to him than being stuck like the doctor.

Derek's thoughts were interrupted as a loud clang sounded in the near distance. He heard the distinct sound of the doctor's characteristic shuffling walk. "How is our specimen?" Mengele asked with what seemed to be genuine interest as he drew closer.

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

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

Derek grimaced, "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't want to end up like you. Just look at what your formula has done to me!" He raised his hand so that the doctor could see his transformed fingers.

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

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

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

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



PART 8

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

Flint's eyes shot open and he looked over to find a leggy brunette standing on the opposite side of the cell. As she did with me, the Goddess seemed to have a calming effect on the revolutionary. "Do you truly believe calling yourself a son of Odin sets you apart from other men?" she continued, her arms crossed over her chest. "And here I thought that all men were sons of my dear departed husband."

Flint couldn't believe his ears. Had she just claimed that she was the wife of Odin? But that would mean "By Odin's Bones!" Flint fell to his knees.

Rolling her eyes, Frigg's voice seemed to grow very cold, "You're almost as bad Aryanna. Get up and stop invoking the name of my dead husband."

Slowly, Flint stood and regarded the Asynja warily. "What would you have of me?"

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

Flint stared at Frigg suspiciously, "To stop Ragnarok?" He folded his arms across his chest and glared at her stubbornly. "Isn't the world supposed to be transformed into a paradise after everything is said and done? Why would I want to stop that? What's in it for me?"

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

"You'll give us the ability to use magic?" he asked growing more suspicious of the Goddess Frigg.

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

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Flint wanted desperately to believe the goddess, but the deal sounded too good to be true. Frigg could have granted men whatever power she was offering centuries ago. Why was she offering now? Why hadn't she done something sooner?

Frigg glanced at Flint and threw her head back and started laughing again. "You need more time to decide." She came over and placed her hand on his cheek. Her hand slithered down his body and stopped at his bad knee. "A gift, as a sign of good faith."

A pleasantly warm sensation passed through his knee, then shot throughout the rest of his body. The pain that had been a constant part of his life for over six years was gone. "My knee!" he muttered in disbelief. "You've healed it!"

She nodded, "Until the coming of the great battle with the Jotun, you will not age." Without any warning whatsoever, Frigg vanished as if she had never even been there. As soon as she disappeared Flint called to the guard and asked that he be allowed to speak with me.



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

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

I nodded, "Of course."

Nicholas hesitated for a moment then spoke, "Ragnarok. I can hardly believe it might actually be coming. What exactly can we do about it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nicholas shook his head. "I'm not sold, but I'm willing to listen."

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That wasn't completely unexpected "First, I need some information. Tell me about Mengele."

Nicholas scowled. "I never liked having that freak around. I tried to convince Talman that we didn't need the doctor, but Talman insisted."

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

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

"Like some sort of hermaphrodite?" I asked.

He shook his head, "No, one side of his body is male, though it's twisted and deformed, while the other side looks like a beautiful woman.

I bit my lip, "That explains a few things. Do know where I can find him?"

Flint shook his head and I sighed warily, "What about Talman, where can I find him?"

Nicholas sighed, "I wouldn't tell you even if I knew."

"There will be someone in to interrogate you shortly," I said standing to leave. "I'm sure that I don't have to tell you what will happen should you refuse to answer them."

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

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



PART 9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Derek gasped in pure agony as the pain crept up his arm and produced further changes. This time the pain lasted for well over an hour, and by the time it had ceased his entire right arm and part of his shoulder had undergone changes. His new arm was extremely stiff and sore and it was damn well impossible to get it to move.

As I mentioned earlier, the room was poorly lit, and Derek had a difficult time seeing the full details of his changes, but he saw enough to dread any future changes. His arm was far shorter and had lost all the muscle mass he had worked so hard to build. The skin color, as he had noted earlier, was a creamy chocolate-tan color, much more reminiscent of his mother's skin tone than his own. His mother was half-Japanese, and had always favored her Japanese ancestry over the African side of her family. He had always favored his African ancestry, showing almost no sign of having any Asian heritage, but apparently the formula was changing that.

Due to the shackles on his wrists, he couldn't take his shirt off, but from what he could tell, his shoulder looked oddly disproportionate under his shirt.

Derek half-expect the doctor to reappear to examine this new set of changes, but the doctor did not show. At one point a shadowy figure that might have been the doctor appeared to slide a tray of food in front of Derek, but he never knew for sure. Derek's right arm was next to useless, so he was forced to eat using his left arm.

Derek wasn't entirely sure how long he sat there in the darkness, but he soon drifted off to sleep, once again finding himself reliving his past.



Derek was nineteen now, and the memory of his father's death still hung over him like a storm cloud. At first he had wanted revenge for his loss, but as time drew on he had come to see that the men that had killed his father as being a small part of a much bigger problem. The Spellbinders controlled everything. Men had little chance of succeeding in a world ruled under their tyrannical fists. Desperate men performed desperate acts.

For these reason, Derek had come to join in the protests at the nation's Capitol. He had spent nearly all of his savings just to get there and he soon found himself surrounded by like-minded men. He shivered in the cold and held up his sign in protest with the rest. The protesters and the police had remained at a peaceful standoff. That all changed with the arrival of the Men's Liberation Front, a masculinist group that had been gaining nationwide attention for it's radical views on men's rights.

Members of the men's group began taunting the police, but for a short while it didn't look as if anything would come of it. Then one of the revolutionists pulled out a gun and all Jotun broke loose. The man was quickly gunned down by the police and the once peaceful protests turned suddenly violent. Derek made a break for it and managed to evade being arrested.

The rioting that broke out lasted for days afterward, and only ended after martial law was declared and the military

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became directly involved. As a result of the riots, the Men's Liberation Front suffered intense scrutiny from the government and was eventually disbanded after several government raids that put a stop to the majority of their activity.



PART 10

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

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

I stepped into sight and smiled down at the diminutive creature, who resembled a very short human. His nose gave him away. It was much too large for his face and resembled a turnip. "You!" he grunted and drew a small battleaxe from his belt.

I summoned a bit of wind magic and sent the blade tumbling out of his hands. "Now, now, Brokk," I said with a cheerful smile, "Let's play nice."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dwarf belched again, "Alfheim."

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

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

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

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

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



Derek snorted loudly and came awake as his shoulder suddenly erupted with pain. The pain spread across his chest and up his neck, and he started screaming as the pain became too much to bear. He couldn't see the changes, but could track their progress as he felt the pain moved across his body.

That's when the doctor chose to reappear and Derek screamed in agony as a particularly sharp stab of pain shot through his nipple. Mengele came over to Derek as he lay on the ground convulsing in agony. "Painful, isn't it?" He sounded almost sympathetic.

The pain was so overwhelming that Derek couldn't have answered had he wanted too. "Let us see." Mengele said and tore open Derek's shirt.

Much to his horror Derek saw the changes that had started to come over his right nipple. It had become severely swollen and a small mound was slowly growing into something that was quickly coming to resemble a breast. That wasn't the only change taking place, a trail of mismatched skin was crawling up his chest toward his neck, and another down toward his waist.

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



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"How is she today?" I asked my mother as I approached. After Penelope's death, Athilda had hired my mother as her assistant. Now that I was acting head of House le Fey, Mom was technically now my assistant, but the majority of her time was spent nursing our ailing ancestor.

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

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

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

My mother knew just what to say. She knew I wouldn't say no to spending time with Marion. "Okay, I'll try to find some time for her, but I need to speak with Athilda," I said, changing the subject. "Where can I find her?"

Mom smiled, "Where else? The gardens."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Athilda gave me an appraising look, "Your debt to the Elf Queen," she whispered. "When did she-"
I cut her off, "Yesterday, and I'd rather not talk about it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Because you deserve to know."

I nodded, "Thanks."

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

I nodded, "Elizabeth."

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

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

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

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

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



PART 11

Flint hated confined spaces and all this time spent cooped up in the cell was starting to get to him. He had stubbornly refused to tell his interrogators anything. It didn't feel right betraying Talman after everything he had done for him. Still, he couldn't escape the feeling of unease that had come over him since learning of Aryanna's belief that Ragnarok was coming. If what she had shown him was true, maybe the revolution wasn't as important as he had believed.

But could he betray Talman? Despite his doubts, the man had been like a brother to him. He didn't feel right just casting that friendship aside like an old rag, nor could he ignore Aryanna's convictions concerning Ragnarok. Shaking his head in frustration, Derek began to pace back in forth across his cell, trying to figure out what he would do.

Hours later he still hadn't come to a decision, but was distracted when for a brief moment he thought he heard a clinking sound. He immediately dismissed it, thinking perhaps he had imagined the sound. Soon enough, he heard it again and he knew immediately that the sound was not a figment of his tired mind. It seemed to be coming from below. What could it possibly be? Flint was in the basement of the CIB facility which had a solid concrete floor. It seemed unlikely that there would be any sound coming from below. He briefly considered calling out to the guard, but immediately dismissed the idea. His instincts told him that that would be a bad idea.

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

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

He nodded, "You're a Kobold."

The Kobold grunted, scowling up at Flint. "You think?" it asked sarcastically. "I never would have guessed. You want outta here or not?"

He nodded. The Kobold threw a pickaxe at Nick from inside its hole. "If you want out you're

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gonna help me make a hole big enough to fit your huge ass."

The Kobold was obviously irritated, and Flint didn't want to aggravate it further, as they were said to be incredibly dangerous when angry, despite their short stature. "Won't the guards be able to hear us?" he asked picking up the pickaxe.

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

Nick quickly did as the Kobold suggested and began working his way to freedom.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This is the last time I ever do a goddess a favor," the Kobold grumbled as Flint slipped into the hole. He found himself in a tunnel that ran as far as the eye see in either direction. Flint had to crane his neck a bit as the tunnel wasn't quite tall enough for him to stand at full-height.

The revolutionary looked down at the tiny Vattir in surprise, "Frigg sent you?"

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

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

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The Kobold glanced at the man then grimaced, "Crystal."

"You're female?" he asked incredulously.

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

Nick shook his head, "No, of course not."

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



PART 12

Two swirling whirlwinds appeared suddenly out from the darkness, fading away just as quickly. From within the swirling masses, Agnes Bernauer and Elizabeth Bathory emerged. "Lizzy" was the first to approach, and as usual she wore a look of contempt and loathing on her face. Agnes on the other hand, seemed genuinely pleased to see me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Agnes nodded, "Direct."

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

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

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

Derek would later claim that he thought he was looking on the face of a Valkyrie as he woke to find me staring down at him. "Am I dead?" he asked softly.

In spite of his appearance I couldn't help but smile. "No," I said sympathetically, "you're in an abandoned apple distillery in Epegard."

"Are you a Valkyrie?" he asked with something akin to adoration in his voice.

Again I smiled. "No, my name is Aryanna le Fey." I didn't know why, but I felt a small bit of pleasure at being compared to such a heavenly being. "The woman on my right is Elizabeth Bathory," I continued, motioning toward a stern-faced Elizabeth. "And this is Agnes Bernauer on my left," I added motioning toward my other companion.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Derek," He croaked out.

"Nice to meet you Derek. I'm looking for someone named Dr. Mengele. Do you know where I can find him?"

Derek shook his head, "I don't know where he is. He'll probably be back soon. He hasn't taken any blood in a while."

I restrained a grimace as I reached over to the shackle on his right wrist. There was a brief flash of light as I summoned some earth and fire magic, then the shackle dissolved into amorphous goo. I did the same for the shackle on his left wrist, then the ones about his ankles. I offered Derek my hand and helped him stand.

Derek stumbled and nearly collapsed again, but I summoned a bit of magic to grant me strength and helped him to remain erect. I caught a glimpse of something sliding out of Derek's pant leg and he bent down to pick it up, nearly falling as he struggled to pick up the object. I caught site of it and felt bile rise in my throat as I realized what Derek was holding in his hands.

"Frigg and Hel," he muttered, then dropped his testicles from his hands and bent over to loose the contents of his stomach at my feet. I almost did the same, but managed to keep myself from vomiting, if only just barely.

There was a sudden and familiar chill in the room as a swirling whirlwind appeared and dissipated. "My Lady," spoke a raspy voice. "Who have you brought to see us?"

Agnes Bernauer reacted almost instantly, sending a huge blast of white fire at Elizabeth Bathory. The older Spellbinder crumbled to the floor. Agnes rounded on me, sending a great blast of lightning at me. Fortunately, I managed to raise a Spirit Shield in time, as lightning crackled harmlessly around my soft blue barrier.

I was shocked by Agnes sudden attack. I never would have suspected that Agnes had been the

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traitor. Elizabeth had seemed the most likely candidate, and I had fully expected her to attack me when Mengele appeared.

Agnes grimaced and her face changed. I watched in amazement as the Agnes' hair shifted and contorted, becoming longer, and changing color from gray to pure white. As her skin became completely black and her nose flattened against her face, her head became rounder and her teeth began to protrude from her mouth, becoming razor sharp. "How did you know?" The Dark Elf Sorceress that had been Agnes Bernauer shrieked at me.

I grunted against her continued onslaught, "I didn't, but I've suspected for a long time that the de Clissons were working with someone else within the Seidskati. I always thought it was Elizabeth who was the traitor. I never would have guessed that a Dark Elf had been masquerading as Agnes."

The creature shrieked and unleashed more lightning against me. It was almost too much for me to bear, and I fell to my knees against the strain of this new onslaught. The Dark Elf laughed and it took all the power I could muster just to keep my shield up.



PART 13

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

The Kobold grunted in annoyance, but otherwise ignored the revolutionary's question. He was just about to demand an answer from the diminutive Vattir when she stopped suddenly, pronouncing, "We're here."

"We're where?" Flint asked in obvious befuddlement.

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

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

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

Flint unwrapped the cloth from the bundle and found a small .22 caliber pistol wrapped inside. "Thanks, but what would I possibly need this for?" the revolutionary called down the hole, but received no answer from the Kobold. He examined his surroundings and recognized them almost immediately. He wasn't sure why the Goddess would bring him here of all places, but he had a feeling that something important was about to go down. Taking one last look around, Flint raised the small pistol and made his way to the nearest doorway.



"Norns preserve!" I yelled against the Dokkálfur's onslaught. Goddesses, she was powerful! All my

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power was being used to hold my shield, and soon even that wouldn't be enough.

Just when I thought the Dark Elf would finally break through my defenses, the onslaught of lightning suddenly stopped. Ready to take advantage of the sudden reprieve I drew on my magic and sent a blast of wind and fire at the now defenseless Dokkálfur. I quickly realized, however, that my attack had been completely unnecessary. The Dark Elf had slumped to the floor with a bullet in her head.

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

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

I wasn't entire sure what he meant by that remark, but I shook my head and walked over to where Elizabeth lay and knelt down beside her. I summoned my magic and felt for signs of life. When I found she was alive, I touched her cheek and let a small trickle of magic escape my fingers. With a start, the elderly Spellbinder came awake. "Agnes," she muttered.

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

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

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

Elizabeth nodded, "I owe you my life."

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

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

"No problem," Nicholas said, looking a bit uncomfortable under the ancient Spellbinder's gaze.

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

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



Flint and I locked eyes, and I suppressed a shudder as I briefly caught a glimpse of the horrors he had witnessed. "What have you decided?" I asked, showing no sign that what I had seen disturbed me.

We were standing inside what had formerly been Athilda's office, but now served as what I had

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come to call the 'Ragnarok Room.' Maps, books and various diagrams, all pertaining to Ragnarok, were strewn all about the place. Flint's cold eyes seemed to soften a bit and he looked suddenly very tired. "I can't believe I'm about to say this, but I believe you. I truly do."

I walked across the room and produced a bottle of Akvavit from within a cupboard. "Care for a drink?"

Nick nodded, "Please."

I poured us each a glass and handed one to Flint. The revolutionary downed it almost immediately. "Haven't had a good drink in days," he muttered, giving me an appreciative look.

I smiled and downed my own glass. "I know how you feel," I said, frowning into the empty glass. "As much as I hate being acting head of House le Fey, the position does have it's advantages."

Flint pursed his lips, "Like the occasional glass of a fine spirit?"

I nodded, "Yes. Of course. But we aren't here to talk about Spirits, are we?"

"No," Flint said putting his glass down on my desk. "I suppose not. You're probably wondering why I haven't given you an answer. I've been muddling it over in my head and no matter how I look at it, I keep coming to the same conclusion."

I smiled, "What would that be?"

Nick sighed, "As hard as it is for me to admit, I think I was taken in by Talman. I believe he knows that Ragnarok is coming, and has chosen what he believes to be the winning side."

I shook my head, "You think he is knowingly serving the Jotun?"

Flint nodded. "From what you've told me, the de Clissons were willfully serving the Jotun, as was that Dark Elf I killed. I think it unlikely that Talman would unknowingly ally himself with two different servants of the Jotun without becoming suspicious. He's too smart for that."

"Knowingly or unknowingly he is aiding the enemy," I said with a sad smile.

Flint grimaced miserably, "The Jotun will see the world destroyed should the Goddesses lose the final battle. Jonas must have some reason to believe the Jotun will spare him if he has allied himself with the giants, and I've helped him, blithely unaware of his duplicity." He picked up the empty glass and staring longingly into it. "That's why you'll need me. I know Talman, I know how he thinks and I know what his next move will be."

"So I take you've made your decision," I said a triumphant smile creeping onto my face.

Flint nodded, "I guess I have."

"I think that's reason enough for another drink," I said pouring us each another shot of Akvavit.



PART 14

Derek woke in what was to him a foreign place. He was laying atop a bed in a guest room within Athilda's estates. "Where am I?" he muttered under his breath as he looked about the lavish room. The last thing he could remember was the battle with the Dark Elf.

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

"Who are you?" Derek asked taken aback, surprised by the girl's sudden appearance.

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

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

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

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

She shook her head, "Nope."

Sighing bitterly, Derek reached across the bed to remove the blanket that had been lying atop him. As he did so, he noted that his transformation had not progressed any further since his last bout of changes. He ran quickly across the room and looked himself over in the mirror. Like the doctor, one half of his body was male and the other was female. Unlike Mengele, his male side didn't look the least bit deformed.

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

Marion came over to stand next to him. She glanced up at him with a curious expression on her face. Derek didn't respond, not sure of what to say. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words escaped his lips as he looked down at the girl. How could he explain his predicament to this child? He held no obligation toward her, and there was no need to tell what had been done to him, but for some reason he felt a strong desire to tell Marion all about his changes.

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He stared at the girl awkwardly, and was saved from speaking as the door opened and I appeared from the other side of it. Derek seemed nervous as our eyes met and, strangely enough, I felt a bit of a nervous twinge myself.

"Derek," I said smiling at him. "How are you doing?"

He shook his head, "As good as can be expected."

I gave him a sympathetic smile then I looked about remembering that the girl was still present. "Marion would you please leave us?"

She groaned and pouted, but quickly complied, storming angrily out of the room. As soon as she had vacated it, my attention returned to Derek and I spoke, "I don't want to get your hopes up, but I think I might be able to reverse your changes."

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

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

Derek looked back at me with a look of utter confusion on his face. "Why would I want to be a woman?"

Again, I hesitated, "While you were unconscious, I probed your mind. Please, don't be angry," I added quickly noting the shocked look that had appeared on his face. "Let me explain." I raised my hand as Derek opened his mouth to speak. He looked uncomfortable and I could understand why. A person's thoughts were private. To have someone else look upon them was deeply unsettling.

"When I was first made Athilda's apprentice, I was kidnapped and my mind was invaded," I continued smiling apologetically as I did so. "My kidnapper intended to make me into an assassin by altering my mind. I had to be sure they hadn't tried to do the same with you. When I looked into your mind I found a strong sense of right and wrong, and an even stronger desire to be accepted as an equal to women in our society. I could use someone like you."

Derek looked as if he were at a loss for words and he stared at me awkwardly as if trying to think of something to say. "Use me for what?" he finally managed to mutter.

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

He gave me an incredulous look and glared at me as if wondering whether I were sane. "That's ..." he muttered trailing off.

"Crazy?" I said with a smile. "I know how it sounds."

Once more he stared at me in awkward silence. "I don't know what to think. I need some time to think," he finally managed to say.

I nodded in understanding, "Take all the time you need," I said, turning away leaving him alone with his thoughts.



Derek was, once again alone in the same guest room he had awakened in when a woman suddenly appeared before him. "Norns," he muttered in astonishment. "Where the Frigg did you come from?"

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

"You're Goddess Frigg?" he muttered in amazement. "That's it! I've lost it completely. I'm seeing things."

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

Derek hesitated, then looked her over from head to foot. He wanted to say something, but only managed a slight nod.

This small gesture appeared to be enough for the goddess as she smiled at him from across the room, "Much better. What have you decided regarding Aryanna's offer?"

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

Frigg smiled sadly, "Yes, but she could kill you if she's not careful."

Derek shook his head, "And Ragnarok? Can it be stopped."

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

"You think I should accept her offer?" he asked, looking at the goddess with a sense of dread.

She smiled sadly, "What I think doesn't matter, mortal. The choice must be yours."

"That's it?" he asked her incredulously. "Surely, you can give me something that will help me decide!"

Frigg seemed momentarily taken aback, then suddenly threw her head back and started to laugh, a deep and hearty laugh. She smiled down at him, "She needs you. Even now she feels drawn to you, but does not yet understand why."

Derek's heart skipped a beat and he hesitated for a moment as his heart and mind waged war with one another. He had been drawn to her since their meeting, but neither could he stand the thought of being stuck as a woman for the rest of his life. He stared up at the goddess as if pleading for her to make the decision for her. A sigh escaped his lips as acceptance passed through him. "Then I suppose I'll ask her to complete the changes," he muttered, feeling dread mingled with relief as he locked his eyes with those of the goddess.

Frigg gifted Derek with an approving smile, "There is no need for her to invoke the changes when I

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can do so without risk to your life," She walked across the room to stand before Derek and gently stroked his cheek.

Suddenly, a very familiar yet considerably less severe pain coursed throughout Derek's body. This time the changes came on much more quickly, and he gasped as a very strange sensation passed over his crotch. It burned where his penis had remained stubbornly attached above a partial formed vagina. He quickly tore open his pants and watched as his penis suddenly shot inward and formed a complete vulva.

"Be patient with her," the goddess whispered. He looked over where she had been standing and found she was gone. He quickly tore off his remaining clothes and watched as the changes rippled across his body. He struggled against the pain as he walked across the room where a mirror was mounted on the wall. He watched as the changes shifted across his face, neck, torso, and lower body.

The breast on the right side of his chest seemed to grow just a bit larger, then the area around the left nipple almost seemed to inflate and there were two breasts on his chest. The changes to his face completed first, and he found himself captivated by the sight of the woman in the mirror. His eyes were now slightly slanted, though his facial features were still predominantly African. There was an ever so slight resemblance to his mother, but he was much more attractive than his mother had ever been. Strangely enough, his hair had grown nearly a foot in length with the new set of changes. Gradually, the changes were completed across the rest of his body and the pain faded away.

The woman in the mirror had a captivating figure to match her face and Derek could hardly believe that he was looking upon his own reflection. There were a few features in his face that stuck out as familiar, but for the most part there was very little resemblance to his previous self. He looked at his reflection and felt his stomach lurch at that the thought that he would have to live as a woman for the rest of his life. Had he really made the right choice?



After dressing himself in the set of ill-fitting clothes that he found within the closet, Derek left the privacy of the guest room and left in search of me. He found me in the hallway as I was conversing with my mother. I caught sight of him almost immediately felt my jaw drop as I noted his now fully female form. "Derek? How did you? ..."

"I, uh, had a little help," he muttered awkwardly, and I found myself mesmerized by the sight of the beautiful woman that stood before me.

"Frigg," I muttered finding myself at a loss for words.

I don't know what made him do it, but suddenly I found his lips locked with my own. Shocked by the sudden contact, I quickly broke away and stared at the new woman in shock.

"I ... I'm sorry," he muttered apologetically. "I don't know ..."

I stepped back from Derek with a sinking feeling in my heart. "Please don't. I ... just can't."

"Lady Aryanna!" A voice called from behind.

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"Yes what is it, Meredith?" I quickly replied, eager to seize upon the interruption.

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

"We will speak later," I said, casting Derek an awkward glance before turning to follow Meredith down the hallway.

"Don't take it personally. She just hasn't been the same since the death of Marion's sister," I heard my mother mutter, and felt my cheeks burn at the thought of the kiss Derek and I had shared.



PART 15

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

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

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

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

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

I sighed feeling the sting of tears beginning to form in my eyes, "Athilda, don't talk like that."

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

Tears streamed unbidden down my face as I muttered, "I don't know what I'll do without you."

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

A small sob escaped my lips as I spoke, "Athilda, I cannot hope to fill your shoes."

Athilda shook her head and smiled up at me with tears in her eyes. "Then do not fill them. Choose your own path. Make me proud."

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

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



It was nearly two in the morning the next day when Derek got up from bed. So many thoughts were coursing through his mind that he found he could not sleep. So he wandered the halls of Athilda's estates trying to make sense of everything that had happened. He found that whenever he needed to work out a problem, walking seemed to help. A change of scenery often led to his greatest moments of inspiration.

As he walked, his thoughts turned to me. He felt a strong attraction toward me and he couldn't understand why he felt such strong feelings toward someone he had only just barely met. My rejection of him had stung much more deeply than he cared to admit. He felt grateful to me for rescuing him, but found himself inexplicably drawn to me for reasons that seemed to go beyond the physical. Even without my presence, the urge to embrace me was undiminished, and he could not understand why. He knew I held no obligation toward him. We had only just met, but it didn't stop him from feeling the way he did.

As he wandered through the hallways he stopped just short of a dimly lit room whose door was open. Who could be up at this hour? Curiosity got the better of him and he poked his head inside the doorway. A sickly looking elderly woman lay atop a bed. He knew instantly who this woman must be, even though he had never seen her before. It was Athilda, the ailing head of House le Fey. Adjacent to the bed sprawled atop an armchair I was asleep, or at least I wanted him to think I was.

"Child," a voice said suddenly, and Derek nearly jumped out of his skin. He looked in the direction of the voice and found Athilda le Fey staring right at him.

"You are the one Aryanna rescued, are you not?" The old woman spoke with a weak voice that still managed to convey great strength.

Derek merely nodded and stared at the Spellbinder, his mouth agape.

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

Derek nodded dumbly and stepped quietly into the room, being careful to not wake me. Hesitatingly, he stepped towards the ancient woman's bed then he knelt down beside her.

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

"Because of Ragnarok?" I asked.

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

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

Athilda laughed weakly, "Patience, child." There was a one final gasp from the Spellbinder, then as suddenly as if someone had flicked a switch she was gone. Almost immediately, I jumped from my position on the armchair, all pretense of being sleep forgotten as I clutching at my ancestor's lifeless body. As I wept, Derek wept along with me.



It had been nearly a week since I had rescued Derek and he had remained within the estates at a loss for what to do or where to go. He had no way of proving his identity, and no sense of purpose beyond his strange attraction to me. I had been of no help whatsoever. I held the only means by which Derek might have any sort future within my hands, but had shown no inclination to do anything about it. Derek had not attended Athilda's funeral, but it had been a beautiful service nonetheless.

Just a day after Athilda's death Derek had discovered the gardens, and had since secluded himself within them. He would later confide in me that he found himself at peace there. The gardens only served to remind me of Athilda, and what her loss meant to me.

"Mind if I join you?" I said to Derek as I drew close. His head snapped up with a startled look on his face. Clearly, he had not expected to see me.

"Go ahead, I was beginning to think you had forgotten about me," he muttered bitterly.

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

Derek shook his head, "I can understand that Athilda's death was hard for you, but that doesn't mean you can just ignore me. "

"You're right. I have no excuse. I can't let my personal life get in the way of my duties now that I'm the head of House le Fey," I grimaced at the thought that I had become something I had once hated.

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

Derek look me in the eyes and I felt my heart melt at the sight of his beautiful female face. "I... I don't know if that's such a good idea," he muttered. "Ever since I first laid eyes on you I've wanted nothing so much as to be with you, but ..."

I cut him short as I drew so close that I could feel his lips brush against my own. "I have something to confess," I said. "I overheard you speaking with Athilda the night she died. I've been torn with guilt ever since. Ever since I laid eyes on you, I've felt a connection, but until you kissed me I didn't understand it. I think I must have been in denial."

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

"So ..." I muttered, "Will you accept my offer."

Derek bit his lip doubtfully. "What about you and me?"

"I'm willing to give it a try, but my last relationship ended badly. I want to take things slow," I said, looking him in the eyes apprehensively.

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Derek smiled back at me, and I found that I could no longer keep myself from kissing him.

❖ TO BE CONCLUDED ❖

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