

# Heart of Mischief

The word "of" is centered between two detailed line drawings of leafy branches. The branches have several leaves with visible veins and small clusters of berries or buds. The drawings are positioned on either side of the word "of", which is written in a simple, elegant serif font.

SOUL OF SHADOW:  
BOOK TWO

EMMA NOYES



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This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS



ÄLVOR—thimble-size, gossip-prone fairies whose song is perilous to humans

BIFROST—the rainbow bridge that connects all eight realms

DRAUGAR—undead monsters with skeletal forms

DÖDSSTEN—the death stone; a gem that opens the gate to Helheim

MARE—human turned to creature of shadow; servant of Loki; giver of nightmares

MJOLLNIR—name of Thor's legendary hammer

RAGNARÖK—the prophesied destruction of Asgard

THE SEAL—the invisible barrier between Earth and Asgard; tethered to Odin's spear, Gungnir

VALKYRIE—powerful winged female warrior; servant of Odin; they carry those fallen in battle to eternal rest in Valhalla

VÄTTE—tiny gnomes who are drawn to humans of exceptional bravery; giving them a name solidifies the magical tether between human and vätte

VITTRA—ugly, bad-tempered, goblin-like creatures of the forest

WILL-O'-THE-WISP—small spirit of the dead that carries a green lantern and can lead travelers astray

### WIVES OF THE FOREST:

- ASH WIFE (*askafroa*)—protector of the great world tree; one *askafroa* lives inside each ash tree
- WOOD WIFE (*skogsroa*)—mistress of the forest; appears as a beautiful woman with hooves for feet but can disguise herself as any tree or animal

YGGDRASIL—the great world tree upon which hang all eight realms



## LIST OF THE GODS



ODIN—the Allfather; king of all gods and goddesses

FRIGG—goddess of beauty and song; Odin's wife

THOR—god of thunder; wielder of the great hammer, Mjollnir; Odin's son

LOKI—god of mischief and trickery; Odin's blood brother

BALDER (*deceased*)—most pure and kind of the gods; Odin's favorite son

HEIMDALL—protector of the Bifrost

HOD—the blind god; tricked by Loki into murdering Balder

FREYJA—goddess of love and battle

FREY—god of royalty and agriculture



## THE FENRIR'S RIDDLE



*Evil lava,  
deepest blue,  
dance in the moonlight,  
impossible but true.*

# Prologue



*Three weeks after homecoming*

FROM HIS SEAT ON THE PLUSH VELVET armchair, Elias Everhart could see everything.

The dancers. The dwarves. The vittra. The reindeer. The pixie-size fairies and the elves with pointed ears. The guards standing at each of the entrances, all in mare form in the unlikely event of an attack. *Highly* unlikely, if Elias were being honest.

No one dared to invade the underworld.

Loki had organized quite the show that night. Elvish women twirled on silks dangling from the eighty-foot-tall ceiling. Trapeze artists swung through the air, passing flaming torches to each other with their teeth. A pair of towering giants fought at the center of an enormous ring, much to the delight of everyone in a betting mood. And, as always, the mead flowed in abundance.

Holding court above it all was Loki and his daughter, Hel—the queen of the underworld. They sat on twin thrones, Hel with her legs crossed, back hunched, and face propped on one hand, ever the image of the petulant teenager. As far as Elias knew, for most of eternity, there had been only *one* throne atop that raised stone dais. It was only when Loki was banished to Helheim that he insisted on ruling beside his daughter.

Elias tried not to look at Hel for too long. Her face—one half

alive and beautiful, all creamy olive skin and long eyelashes, the other half dead and rotting, eyeball stem and teeth visible even from his spot a hundred feet away—had always unsettled him.

At the foot of the dais, three ash wives danced, their bark-covered hips swaying to the sound of the fiddle and flute played by a pair of dwarves tucked away in some distant corner of the grand hall. Ash wife spirits were Loki's favorite to watch. Normally, the god of mischief took in their performances with a casual half smirk on his face.

Today, he didn't seem to be enjoying himself at all.

Something had been off with Loki since his brief visit to Silver Shores. Something beyond the god's usual mercurial attitude and petty annoyances. Perhaps it had to do with what had happened to his son, the Fenrir wolf, who'd had half his teeth cut from his mouth right before Loki dragged him back to Helheim. Elias had no idea where the god was keeping the wolf now. He wasn't even sure if the Fenrir should be considered friend or foe. Or maybe Loki was on the verge of making one of his proclamations, an announcement for a ball or tournament or whatever other seemingly random scheme he'd dreamt up to pass his time in exile. But Elias didn't think so; for three weeks, the god of mischief had been in what could only be described as a "funk," and he had no idea why.

Elias felt strangely restless himself. Usually, he enjoyed his time in the underworld, with its ample free alcohol and entertainment. Right now, he was seated on a deliciously soft armchair, surrounded by the souls of beautiful human women who, while technically dead, felt plenty alive in the way they sprawled across his lap and petted his hair. Between the gorgeous company and the mead flowing through his veins—with more waiting in the goblet dangling from his fingers—he should have been in a state of bliss.

But while Elias had done his best to enjoy this sure-to-be-brief vacation from his duties in Asgard, he hadn't been able to fully

relax. To let go. The theatrics were dull. The mead was sour. Even Helheim's landscape seemed to have lost some of its strange beauty.

Though he didn't want to admit it, Elias was in a funk, too.

It was strange. Mares didn't feel "sad" or "down" or "depressed." They didn't feel anything, really. It was one of the biggest perks of the job: being free from messy emotions and a pesky conscience, the two things that make humans most miserable. Since the moment he'd completed his Trial to become a mare, he'd felt nothing. Nothing but thirst for fear, of course, and the delicious euphoria when that thirst was finally quenched.

For seven years, he'd let those two impulses guide him, assist him in carrying out whatever missions Loki assigned him.

Then he met *her*, and everything changed.

She did something to him. Coaxed out feelings he'd thought were gone forever. Resurrected them like the magician she was, skilled and sneaky. Always one step ahead. There hadn't been one moment where he'd felt his emotions come back to life, no sensation of a light switch flicking from off to on. It had been a gradual thing. A pickaxe chipping away at the dam of his feelings, creating hundreds of tiny holes, so small that he didn't realize they were even there until it was almost too late.

That night—homecoming—Elias had teetered on the precipice of something impossible. Something that would have brought the dam down entirely. Something intoxicating and delicious and absolutely, catastrophically forbidden.

But before that could happen, thank the *gods*, the girl had revealed the truth:

She'd never felt anything for him at all.

It had all been some stupid act. A ploy. Nothing more than a way to get the information she needed for her sister.

She had used him.

It was humiliating to think of how much the realization had hurt him. Like a knife through his newly revived heart. Chest bone

shattered, aorta sliced open, blood all over the tiled hallway floor. It was too much to bear. In that moment, Elias realized that he would much rather go back to the pleasant numbness of the previous seven years than suffer through the excruciating pain of losing yet another person he . . .

In the brief seconds between deciding to dam his emotions back up and actually *doing* so, there was panic. Panic brought on by the fact that he didn't actually know if he could. What if all of that repulsive *feeling* that he'd done toward that girl had made just one too many holes? What if he had opened himself up not only to the pain of her rejection, but to everything else, too? All the hurt that had driven him to trade in his soul in the first place?

Thankfully, there was no such issue. He gummed up the holes, plastered them over with six feet of cement, and went right back to being the handsome, murderous sociopath he loved seeing in the bathroom mirror each morning.

He suspected that he had done so just in the nick of time—and tried not to dwell on what would have happened if he'd waited even an hour longer.

After doing away with those pesky emotions, the path forward had become obvious: steal Lou, bring her to the Fenrir as an offering in exchange for the riddle, and murder anyone who tried to get in the way.

Ta-da! Problem solved.

Such was the beauty of thinking without a conscience: no idiotic “morals” getting in the way of what needed to be done to meet one's goals.

For the most part, his plan worked. He kidnapped Lou, got the riddle out of the Fenrir, and made it back to Helheim alive. The only downside was that he hadn't actually gotten to murder anyone.

Not for a lack of trying, though.

And now he was in a funk, and so, apparently, was Loki.

Over on the dais, Loki was watching the ash wives dance with about as much enthusiasm as Elias would have felt if someone had suggested they go rescue a sinking ship filled with orphans. Which was to say, none. The god of mischief was deep in thought, his brow furrowed beneath the salt-and-pepper hair he usually chose to sport. Given that Loki was an immortal being who could shape-shift into literally any form—male, female, young, ancient, strong, wiry—Elias sometimes wondered why he spent the bulk of his time as a middle-aged man. Loki was so vain naturally that Elias would've expected the god to keep himself free of gray hair and wrinkles for all of eternity.

As Elias considered this, Loki's expression shifted. It was subtle but clear: a loosening of the forehead, a clearing of the fog in his eyes. The god had made some kind of decision, and whatever it was had led him to scan the crowd.

To his surprise, Loki's eyes locked on Elias.

Elias stiffened. He fought the urge to avert his gaze, worried the god would think he had been staring. Which . . . granted, he *had* been staring, but there was no reason Loki needed to know that.

After a beat, the god lifted one hand and crooked his finger in summons.

Elias's heart picked up speed. He thought he'd somehow slid past any repercussions after the fiasco in Silver Shores, but maybe his time had finally come. Inhaling, Elias pushed the women off his lap, rose to his feet, and started through the crowd.

When he reached the dais, Loki clapped twice.

"Ash wives," he called, "you are dismissed."

The tree spirits stopped dancing at once. They bowed low before swaying off into the party, leaving a trail of twigs and leaves in their wake.

As Elias watched them slink away, he couldn't help but compare them to the ash wives he'd met on Asgard. Outside of the underworld, ash wives were fearsome creatures to behold. They were the

guardians of the eight realms, the protectors of Yggdrasil—better known as “the world tree,” a white ash as big as the universe itself, upon which hangs every known realm. Living ash wives would never dance for someone else’s entertainment. Not even a god’s.

But this wasn’t Asgard. This was Helheim, the underworld, the home of the dead, ruled over by Loki and his daughter. Down here, you listened to your rulers, or you suffered the consequences.

Once the ash wives were gone, Elias bowed to Loki and Hel. “Your Majesties.”

Hel didn’t even grunt in response.

Elias straightened in time to see Loki shoot his daughter a stern look, then wave over a soul servant holding a huge bronze pitcher. “More mead!” he called, a smile curling his lips for the first time all evening. “My daughter’s cup is empty, and it’s making her churlish.”

Hel pursed her lips—or, more accurately, half pursed them, as only half of her face had lips to begin with—and said, “It isn’t the lack of mead that’s bothering me, Father.”

Loki ignored her. As his goblet filled with fresh mead, he studied Elias. The attention made the mare want to squirm, but he kept his gaze steady.

“Thank you for coming,” Loki said at last, waving away the soul servant. “I have a mission for you.”

Elias’s eyebrows rose. “A mission?”

“Yes.” Loki took a sip from his goblet. “I need you to head to Alfheim.”

*Alfheim?* “But I just got here.”

Loki laughed. “That’s hardly true, my boy. You’ve been on leave a full three weeks. Haven’t you had enough drinking and dancing yet?”

“One can never have enough drinking and dancing, sir.”

“On that we agree.” Loki winked. “But I need someone to make a discreet visit to the realm of the elves.”

Inwardly, Elias groaned. He had no interest in visiting Alfheim, a realm so hideously peaceful that any mare worth their salt feels sapped of energy the moment they set foot on its repulsively beautiful meadows.

*Unless, he mused, Loki is sending me there to sack the capital, Ljósborg.*

Now, *that* would be a mission he could get behind.

Greatly cheered, Elias puffed out his chest. “What’s the assignment?”

As Loki opened his mouth to reply, a voice interrupted.

“Sir.”

Elias glanced back to find Ragnar, leader of the mare guard of Helheim, standing at attention. Ragnar was, as always, in shadow form, his hulking body and shoulder-length hair outlined in flickering darkness. Elias had never seen the head guard’s true face—not even in the gambling den, where the other guards gathered on days off to drink and bet and occasionally throw hands. Everyone who came did so in human form. It was a house requirement; it’s too easy to cheat when you’re made of shadow.

But Ragnar never joined. Elias wasn’t even sure that he’d taken a single day off since becoming head guard centuries before. The man was obsessed with honor and duty.

*Yawn.*

Elias looked back up at Loki.

“This better be important,” the god said, eyebrows raised. “I was just about to send Elias here to wreak some delicious havoc on those imperious, annoying elves.”

“It is,” said Ragnar. “We have received news from Asgard.” He paused. “News that requires your urgent attention.”

“My urgent attention?” Loki snorted. “There’s no such thing as urgency in the afterlife.”

The corners of Ragnar’s mouth didn’t so much as twitch. “Trust me, sir. You’re going to want to hear this.”

Loki studied him. At last, he nodded and gestured for Ragnar to approach. The mare climbed the steps up to the dais and bent over to whisper in Loki's ear. Within seconds, the god's eyes expanded with uncharacteristic shock.

When Ragnar was done speaking, Loki leaned back and looked him in the eye. "You're certain?"

Ragnar nodded.

Loki turned away, rubbing his chin absently with a thumb and forefinger. It was his usual look of calculation, of the wheels turning as he cooked up a brand-new plan. But there was something different about this particular expression. Normally, when he was in this state, his eyes flashed and glimmered, as if lit from within. A small smile would play at his lips. But this time . . . this time, his eyes were dark, his lips turned down. Almost as if he was worried.

But the god of mischief never worried.

Right?

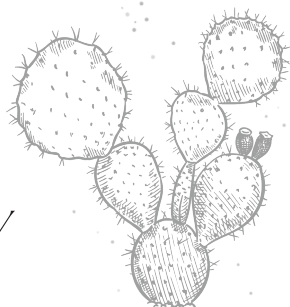
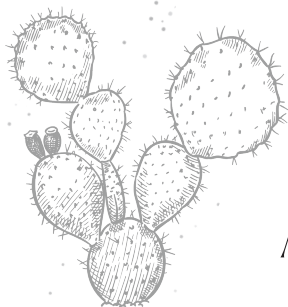
When Loki's eyes returned to Elias, his face had altered once more. Now, it was resolute. Locked into whatever path he had chosen.

"Change of plan, Elias." He leaned back on the throne, folding his hands on his lap. "You're going to Asgard, not Alfheim." He hesitated, as if he was still on the fence about what came next. "But first, there's something you need to know."

# Part

# II

# MONDAY





THE VITTRA HAD NO IDEA HOW CLOSE it was to death. The ground was covered in leaves, and the vittra just hunched there, gnawing at the carcass of what appeared to have once been a two-headed rat. Its focus was on prying every chunk of meat from the rat's bones, not on the trees above where Charlie crouched, concealed by bright fall foliage, bow in hand, ready to take its head off.

It was just past dawn. Early morning light filtered through the leaves, illuminating the hideous creature below.

The vittra was goblin-like, with corpse-gray skin, bulging eyes, poison-tipped teeth, and nails like newly sharpened kitchen knives. Nearly four weeks ago, a whole pack had chased her and Elias through the forest. Thankfully, they'd been able to escape by diving headfirst into Lake Michigan. Vittra loathed bodies of water.

Charlie shuddered to remember how woefully unprepared she'd been for the dangers of Asgard. She had no idea how to defend herself. Had never even wielded a knife before then, let alone a sword or spear or bow and arrow.

Which was why she was perched in a tree.

A twig snapped beside her, and the goblin paused, stubby ears perking up. Charlie swallowed a gasp and ducked behind a cluster of orange-red leaves just before the creature's head whipped around.

Hunched over, she found herself staring down at Henry, who squatted beside her on the tree branch. The vätte's little foot rested

atop a broken twig. She narrowed her eyes. His tiny arms shrugged, and even though she couldn't see his eyes, she somehow knew they were wide with apology. She rolled her eyes and pressed a finger to her lips.

Ever since Charlie had given Henry his name and solidified their bond, he rarely left her side. He sat on her shoulder during training, slept at the bottom of her backpack during history class, stole slices of turkey from Lou's sandwiches during lunch. He was her shadow. To an outsider, his never-ending presence might sound irritating, like a little sibling who won't leave you alone. To Charlie, however, it was exactly right. He was a part of her now. A piece of her soul that lived outside her body.

Not to mention her personal security.

It might seem odd, thinking a pint-size gnome could keep a human safe. But it wasn't. Not when Charlie knew what her tiny friend was capable of. Not when she'd witnessed him transform into something akin to a Tasmanian Devil and take down a draugar like it was nothing, like he faced gigantic undead monsters every day.

Plus, now that she and Henry were tethered together, her vätte partner would always know whenever she was in trouble—and vice versa. It was a comforting thought, when danger lurked around every tree trunk and street corner here in Silver Shores.

Three weeks had passed since homecoming. Three weeks since she barely escaped death. Since she and her friends faced down the Fenrir in the cave under the beach. Since Elias betrayed her.

Three weeks since she first saw her father.

Mason thought Charlie was a fool for even entertaining the idea that Loki might be their biological father. And maybe she was. It did *sound* absurd. The Hudson children, raised in a small town in Michigan . . . children of a god? Outrageous. Still, she couldn't scrub away her memory of Loki's face: handsome and overwhelmingly familiar, with crow's feet, salt-and-pepper hair, and tanned

skin that turned ghostly white the moment he saw Charlie and Mason.

But it was his eyes, more than anything. His eyes were an exact match for hers.

Hers and her sister's, of course. The twin she had thought was dead until three weeks earlier.

The morning after homecoming, when Charlie had finally gathered her thoughts, she wrote Sophie a letter. It wasn't much: a few quick scribbles containing the riddle that the Fenrir had given them in the cave—the riddle that, according to the wolf, would eventually lead them to the location of the Seal, the magical barrier between Earth and Asgard that Odin created to keep humanity safe—and the question she hoped Sophie would be able to answer:

*Loki called us his children. Is it true?*

When she was done writing, she slipped the paper into a plastic Ziploc and staked it to the roof outside her bedroom window using a hammer and nail stolen from the tool kit in the garage. She had no idea how to contact Sophie, but she knew that her twin came to check in on her every so often. She hoped, perhaps foolishly, that Sophie might visit one night and find the letter addressed to her. That she would bring it to Odin and come back with answers, maybe even the solution to the riddle. There's no way the Allfather didn't have a ton of brilliant minds serving in his court.

The next morning, the letter was still there.

And the next.

And the next.

It stayed there, blowing in the brisk fall breeze, and Charlie began to feel silly. What were the odds that her Valkyrie sister, busy fighting the monsters trying to sneak through the ever-multiplying cracks in the Seal, had time to drop by her mortal sister's window? Not great.

On the fourth morning, she went to open the window and take

back the letter. But when she pushed aside the curtains and looked out . . . it was gone. Letter, Ziploc, nail and all.

Now, Charlie stayed low on the branch, holding her breath. She might have the high ground on the vittra, but if it realized she was there before she had a chance to shoot one of her arrows, her advantage was gone. Goblins were perfectly capable of climbing trees using their razor-sharp claws.

She'd learned that the hard way.

She lifted a hand to her chest, rolling the thin steel chain that hung there between her thumb and pointer finger. A gift from Elias. She would gladly be rid of it, but steel was the element that spirits of nature loathed most. Against an army of vittra, the necklace would be no good, but against only one, it should provide her with a modicum of safety. Hopefully. Theoretically. Unless the vittra in question was so pissed off that it was willing to brave the steel in the name of vengeance.

After homecoming, Charlie had gone online and ordered four more steel necklaces—one each for Lou, Abigail, Mason, and her mom. Trish had been touched by the present, albeit clearly confused. Charlie made up a story about a crafts class at school and told her mom that it would mean a lot if she wore the necklace every day. Seriously: *Every. Single. Day.*

She'd also duct-taped steel bars around the outside of their house's windows. Her mom wasn't one to go snooping around the house's exterior for no reason, but Charlie knew she would discover them eventually. After that, she'd have to get more creative with her protective tactics—and her lies.

She let the necklace fall back to her chest. After counting to ten, she lifted her head and squinted through the bright foliage.

Thankfully, the goblin seemed to have written off the snapping twig as harmless forest noise and returned to gnawing on the two-headed rat. Charlie exhaled, her breath rustling the leaves, and reached behind herself to touch the lucky deck of cards always in her back pocket.

Lately, she'd had no time for magic. Not the false kind, anyway—the kind that uses sleight of hand. She was too busy with all the *real* magic running around town. Ever since she had eaten the eyaerberry—the tiny fruit that revealed a new world hidden in plain sight—she saw magic everywhere. On the streets, on the sidewalks, in front yards, in the gutters.

Overall, however, things had been oddly quiet since homecoming. And by *oddly quiet*, Charlie meant that she'd only had to dive into a bush when she saw something black and spiderlike creep out of the gutter once, sprint into the lake to avoid being chased by a pack of vittra twice, and swerve to avoid hitting a variety of enormous golden reindeer with her car four or five times.

For Silver Shores, that was just another Monday.

The presence of magic was especially strong in the forest. She *herself* felt stronger there. Everything was brighter, more beautiful, more ethereal. If she stayed away from it for too long, she started to feel weak, as if metal and machinery were vacuums that sucked the life clean out of her.

Still, even if the thrill of sleight of hand had become somewhat dimmed by the presence of real magic, she never forgot to slip those cards into her back pocket.

These days, Charlie needed all the luck she could get.

She shook her head, focusing on the task at hand. Now was her moment. She needed to shoot before the vittra finished its meal.

She lifted the bow, pulling an arrow from the quiver slung over her back. As silently as possible, she nocked the arrow and took aim. The vittra was partly obscured by foliage; she needed to scoot down the branch to get a good shot. Thanking Odin for her years of training on the tightrope, she slid silently down the wood, feeling the tree bend beneath her. Just a little more to the right, and she'd have a clear—

*Crack!*

Charlie yelped as the limb snapped and her body tumbled

through the air. She hit the ground hard, her right shoulder and side taking the brunt of the fall. Henry squeaked as his tiny body bounced off her legs. Pain lanced through her, little forks of lightning in her muscles that she knew would leave nasty bruises. She had little time to think on the pain, however, because the vittra was barreling toward her, teeth bared and claws flashing. She screamed and squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the attack—

A whoosh sounded over her, followed by a loud *thunk*.

The vittra's claws never pierced her flesh.

Charlie popped one eye open, peering nervously upward. The goblin was no longer over her.

It was skewered to the trunk of the tree she had fallen from, an axe through its chest.

“For Odin’s *sake*, girl,” came Vidar’s familiar booming voice. Charlie glanced over to find his enormous frame towering above the bushes in which he had previously been hiding. The axe that normally dangled from his belt was noticeably missing. “Have I taught you nothing?”



ONE BY ONE, OTHERS POPPED UP BESIDE Vidar. First Bjorn, grinning under his matted blond hair; then Abigail, face twisted with disgust; and finally, Lou and Mason, who stared at the vittra kebab and yelled, “*Gross!*” in gleeful unison. They glanced at each other in surprise, then looked quickly away, cheeks flushing.

“What was that?” Vidar demanded, long black braids swaying as he stormed out of the brush and over to the dead vittra. “What happened to stealth and speed?”

Charlie groaned, letting her head fall back to the forest floor. “I know, I know,” she said, reciting the mantra that the Vikings had drilled into them since they began training three weeks before: “*In the forest, stealth and speed are your greatest allies.*”

“Damn right.” Vidar yanked his axe from the vittra’s chest, causing the goblin to fall to the ground in a jumble of gray limbs and bright green blood. “Though, based on your performance, you’d think *stealth* really meant *elephant footsteps.*”

“I mean,” said Mason, stepping out from the bush and raising the wooden sword at his side. He moved forward a few paces, showing off a few jabs and slices. “Not everyone can be as naturally gifted at fighting as I am.”

“Not bad,” said Bjorn, nodding his blond head once.

“Oh, please.” Lou rolled her eyes. “Don’t compliment him. Any more inflation and that boy’s ego will pop.”

“Yeah,” said Abigail, raising her wooden sword and waving it over her head. “He’s not the only one of us making progress.”

During the wooden sword’s second rotation, Abigail swung it a little too far to the right. Bjorn ducked before it whacked him upside the chin. The Viking barked out a laugh and said, “The only progress you’re making right now is toward giving me a clean shave.”

Abigail lowered the sword and scowled. There was nothing she hated more than not being the best in the class.

A half smile pulled at Charlie’s lips as she watched the familiar banter between the Vikings and her favorite people. Her eyes lingered on Mason, who was spinning the sword with a smug smirk on his face; at least *one* of them might be able to defend themselves against the creatures lurking in the woods.

But when Mason glanced her way, his confident smile slipped. In fact, his entire face seemed to shutter, to fold in on itself—eyes narrowing, brows lowering, lips pursing into a tight, angry bud. For one frigid second, he stared at his sister.

Then he turned away.

*You’re so goddamn selfish.*

Those were the last words her brother had said on homecoming night. The last words before he stopped speaking to her entirely.

A squeak sounded to Charlie’s left, and she looked over to see Henry seated on the forest floor, drenched in a rogue splash of green blood. He lifted his arms to inspect the liquid curiously. He leaned forward, beard rustling, ready to have a taste.

Charlie swatted his arm away from his mouth. “Goblin blood is *not* part of a balanced diet, Henry.”

His beard turned down in a pout.

Sighing, she pushed herself up into a sitting position. Her body felt bruised and tender, like a ripe peach that had rolled down a rocky hill. She wasn’t sure how many more sleepless nights

and early training sessions she could take before she broke down entirely.

It didn't matter. She had to push through. If not for herself, then to set an example for the people she loved—because that was who she was really doing this for.

“Right,” said Vidar, using a rust-stained rag to wipe the vittra blood from his axe. “Demonstration over. We can discuss what the girl did wrong on the walk back to the house.”

Staggering to her feet and trying not to wince at the pain, Charlie said, “Isn't the right way to deliver feedback by including the good *and* the bad?” Henry grabbed her ankle and nimbly scaled her body to come sit on her shoulder, leaving smudges of green blood on her pants and sleeves. “As in, compliment me on what I did right before you berate me for what I did wrong?”

Sliding his axe back into his belt, Vidar grunted. “We're Vikings, not therapists.”

“You humans are so soft these days,” Bjorn agreed as he stomped out of the bushes. “When we were alive, there was no ‘right way’ to give feedback. You let your instructor whip you for messing up, or you got locked in the cellar.”

Lou wrinkled her nose. “I'm pretty sure that's child abuse.”

Bjorn waved one huge, meaty hand. “No such thing back in the Viking Age.” He whacked Mason's shoulder and pointed forward. “Now, walk.”

They did as they were told, Charlie limping while the others chattered merrily. They were completely at ease in the forest, knowing the Vikings were there for protection. Henry nuzzled into her neck. He knew she was in pain. He could always tell.

“So. Abs,” said Lou. “Made any progress on the riddle?”

After homecoming, Abigail had volunteered to take the lead on deciphering the Fenrir's riddle.

“I started doing the crossword in the *Times* when I was six,”

Abigail had announced to the three of them the Monday after homecoming. “I’m more qualified for this job than the rest of you combined.”

Unfortunately—and perhaps unsurprisingly—none of the skills honed by Abigail over a decade of crosswording seemed to have translated into the skills necessary to decipher a centuries-old prophecy.

“I *think* so,” said Abigail now, like she always did when Lou asked about her progress. “I discovered a connection between the phrase *dance in the moonlight* and the setting of one of Shakespeare’s older plays. I’m thinking that if I can link the two, then—”

“So, no,” Lou interrupted. “No progress whatsoever.”

Abigail huffed. “Look. Just because *you* don’t understand the finer points of codebreaking doesn’t mean that no one else does.”

Charlie tuned out the conversation, letting her eyes drift up to the treetops. Red, yellow, and orange leaves swayed in the light morning breeze. She watched them twitch and crackle, yearning to break loose from their branches. Above, a falcon with too many wings soared past, its feathers too bright, its cry unnaturally loud.

One might think that Charlie would be used to Asgard by now. To the vines that wrapped around streetlamps, the strange noises that came from neatly trimmed hedges, the glowing eyeballs that seemed to follow her wherever she went outside, the ash trees that came to life without warning. And, to some degree, she *was* used to it. Or, at least, she’d grown to expect it.

Expect everything, and nothing will surprise you.

Her friends had each taken in their new reality in their own ways. Abigail had accepted Asgard the way she accepted everything she didn’t like: by ignoring it unless it directly benefited her goals.

Lou was a different story entirely. After she awoke from being possessed, they’d given her the final eyaerberry. Ever since, she’d been like a kid visiting a theme park for the first time. More than once, Charlie had to forcibly drag her away from getting too close to the vicious-looking mermaid that lived in the town fountain.

So, no. Charlie still wasn't used to it, this new version of the world she grew up in. The woods where she played as a child and partied as a teenager. Its bones were the same—pine trees, birches, oaks, tangling roots, clusters of moss, rocks made to trip the boots of those who didn't pay enough attention—but its skin was completely different. Brighter. More colorful. Crawling with magic and creatures that lurked just out of sight. Far more beautiful, and far more dangerous, too.

"Matt and the other guys are driving up with me tomorrow to deliver the goods," Mason was saying when she tuned back into the conversation. "We're taking three separate cars."

The upcoming weekend was a special one for Silver Shores High School. On Friday, all 150 of its upperclassmen would load onto two rusty old school buses and chug up north to a state park for the annual overnight Outdoor Education Trip (commonly referred to as the "OET"—pronounced like the breakfast food). As juniors, it was Charlie and the other girls' first time attending. To say that Lou was excited would be the understatement of the century.

"Excellent," Lou said, clapping. "More room for booze."

"Isn't it, like, a three-hour drive to the park?" Abigail asked.

"Sure is," said Mason.

"Good God," said Abigail. "You guys are going to be exhausted."

"Good *gods*," Lou corrected her. "Don't forget. Now that we know there are so many, we can't risk excluding any of them. You know how petty gods can be."

"I don't, actually," said Abigail. "Seeing as I've never met one."

"Yes, you have," said Lou. "You were in the same room as Loki for, like, five whole minutes. Right before he announced Charlie and Mason were his kids, then vanished back to the underworld. A perfect exit, if you ask me."

Mason groaned. "Not this again. That guy was off his rocker, and you know it."

Charlie bristled. It grated on her when Mason said things like

that. She knew how far-fetched the idea sounded, and it's not like she *wanted* to be his daughter—not when he was a famous liar destined to bring about Ragnarök (aka the end of Asgard, aka the apocalypse).

No, her irritation with Mason had nothing to do with any sense of familial loyalty to Loki. She was annoyed that her brother refused to even *entertain* the idea that the god might be their father. He had no interest in digging into the mystery with her, in seeking out the truth. He was the only other person in the world who could understand what she was going through (other than Sophie, and the gods only knew where she was), and he wouldn't even speak to her.

He'd left her all alone.

It was upon Charlie before she even knew it was coming. The terror. The lightheadedness. The sense of doom, of danger just around the next tree. It grasped Charlie without warning, squeezing her chest so tightly that she found it hard to breathe. She clapped one hand to her breastbone.

*Not this*, she thought, dizziness overtaking her. *Not again*.

Her hands trembled. Her heart pounded unnaturally fast, the sound thumping against her eardrums. She no longer had control over her own body, and it was terrifying.

This wasn't the first time she'd had one of these episodes since homecoming night. They came with disturbing regularity, creeping into her body whenever she thought too closely about the danger they were in, or the situation with Mason, or what the Fenrir looked like when she sliced nearly all its teeth off, or the expression of pure shock on Loki's face right before he vanished.

That entire night had been an exercise in repression. Repressing the terror, the anger, the cutting betrayal. She'd just needed to get through the night alive. To make sure the people she loved came out on the other side.

Once they did—when she was finally safe in her bedroom af-

ter arguing with Mason—there was finally time for everything to come crashing down.

And it did.

It had been awful. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The room had tilted sideways, and a roaring filled her ears. She couldn't hear anything but that roar and the hammering of her heart. It was beating so hard, so fast. *Too hard. Too fast.* It couldn't be healthy. What if it beat so fast that it gave out entirely?

*Is that what's happening?* she'd thought. *Is this a heart attack? Am I dying? Did I fight off a draugar and a gigantic wolf and monster made of shadow only to die of a heart attack in the safety of my own bedroom?*

She'd fumbled with the skirt of her torn-up dress, extracting her cell phone from one of its many hidden pockets. The screen glowed too brightly when she turned it on. She squinted against the light, opening a browser and typing the words *can you have a heart attack at sixteen.* She hit Search.

Pages and pages of results loaded. Links to WebMD, the Mayo Clinic, Quora, Reddit. Charlie couldn't read a single one. They blurred together, a mass of blue and black words on a bright-white background. Her heart pounded. Her hands shook. She had no idea what was happening to her. Death was surely imminent.

The closest Charlie had ever come to this feeling was right after Sophie "died." Back then, she'd felt crushing grief, like a river set to drown her, every ounce of joy suffocated from her body, skin bloated with sadness. It had been unbearable. She'd wanted to shut it all off.

And she had. By focusing every bit of her energy on learning close-up magic, she'd done just that.

She knew, as her back pressed to her bedroom door and her heart threatened to slam its way out of her chest, what she had to do. Magic had saved her from her grief by providing a distraction. That was exactly what Charlie needed: a distraction to save

her from whatever awful thing was happening inside her brain. She needed a *plan*.

And there, on the floor of her bedroom, she made one.

First, she would enlist Bjorn's and Vidar's help to teach her and the people she loved how to fight. How to defend themselves from the creatures that lurked in the woods.

Then, once she was strong enough, she would carry out the next part.

*I will kill Elias*, she thought, her heartbeat slowing with every delicious word. *I will make myself strong, and I will kill him. And once I do, I will never trust a boy with my heart again.*

From his place on her shoulder, Henry poked Charlie's neck. She jolted, shaken from her thoughts, and glanced down. Henry made little circles with his arms, then pointed to Charlie's chest.

She knew what he was getting at. Not only could Henry tell whenever she was in danger, but he could also tell when her body *thought* it was in danger—even if there was no threat in her direct vicinity. Every time one of these episodes clutched at Charlie, Henry showed up at her side.

He was reminding her of what she needed to do. Of the three tricks she had to take her focus off the darkness swelling within her, to keep it from swallowing her entirely:

Research, train, recite.

*Research* meant taking out a book or her laptop and diving into her studies on Norse mythology. *Train* meant grabbing the spatula hidden in her bedside table and using it to practice the Vikings' sword-fighting techniques, the closet mirror her only opponent. And *recite* . . . recite was the distraction she could use anytime, anywhere, no props necessary.

As she walked through the trees, she closed her eyes and recited the words:

*You will make yourself strong.*

*You will find Elias.*

*You will kill Elias.*

*You will never trust a boy with your heart again.*

It was her mantra. A version of the promise she'd made to herself on homecoming night. A prayer that she recited whenever the terror threatened to close in, to dunk her beneath its water and drown her, as surely as the tide itself.

Now, she could feel the mantra working its power. Could feel her heart slowing down, her breath lengthening, the trembling in her hands starting to recede. She was okay. Her friends were okay. There was nothing in the forest trying to hurt them.

She exhaled in relief.

They were okay.

With that comforting thought in mind, she reached out and pushed aside a cluster of pine branches, ready to lead the way back to the old house . . .

Only for her eyes to land on two dead bodies splayed out on a bed of fallen leaves.