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The house in Alfheim had changed, the understated wood and stone turned into a palace of gleaming glass and turrets that rose so high they were barely visible amongst the clouds. Kat stared uncomprehending, wondering how such a thing was possible.

"It is all due to our son," Val said proudly. "He has a knack with magic that is unsurpassed in recent history." Val put a hand on the twelve-year-old's shoulder. "It is the combination of goddess and Elven blood."

Kat turned to Arwen, afraid for a second. This boy had nearly killed her when he was but a baby. But before she could utter a word, he had moved close and was pulling her into a hug.

"I am so glad to see you," he murmured in a voice nearly as deep as Val's. "I am sorry for how I behaved." He chuckled and pulled back. "A Fae child has no inner restraint unless trained by a member of the Elven race."

Kat was taken into the luminous eyes, not at all sure she trusted him, even now. There was guile behind that innocent look he was giving her. She smiled. "It was a long time ago."

"Yes, too long," Val agreed, moving close to put his arms around her. "Arwen is much changed. There is no need to worry," he whispered in her ear.

In truth it had only been a little over two years, but in that short time her baby had reached his father's height. He looked nearly full grown. Kat glanced at the uninviting monstrosity in the distance, her gaze lingering on the lack of roses, lavender

and other blooming plants. This garden was stark, with nothing in it but strange sculptures that echoed the house design. "What happened to the roses?"

Val's expression went dark for a millisecond before he said, "Arwen didn't like them. He felt they were an unnecessary addition to a castle that needed no enhancement."

Kat peered up at the tapered points that resembled skewers. They were sharp like the tips of bayonets or javelins. She suppressed the shudder that went through her body. "It is rather grand, isn't it?"

Val nodded. "Shall we go inside? I have some food prepared and we can talk about why you are here."

Arwen moved to walk beside her, his sidelong glances making her uncomfortable. "I have your hair color," he finally announced. "And your eye shape, I think."

Kat smiled up at him. "Yes. I see it. But your eyes are crystalline blue, like your father's."

"All the Fae have eyes like this," he said smiling. He strode ahead to open the door for them.

Kat watched him, surprised by his need to charm her. Those eyes were where the Fae magic lay, their ability to cast spells with a look, something she'd dealt with in the past. It was why she was mother to Arwen.

The inside of the edifice was just as changed as the outside, with copper tables and gleaming glass everywhere. She missed the wooden benches, the enormous fireplace and the homey feel of the former building.

“Bring in the plate I arranged,” Val told his son. “I’ll get the drinks.” He motioned for Kat to sit at the highly polished metal table.

“Where is Isabel?” Kat asked as she settled into an uncomfortable chair. Isabel had served them the last time she’d been here, and Kat had been looking forward to seeing the diminutive Fae woman who had done her hair and dressed her during the time she was blind from the witch’s spell. Val had helped her through it, her sight returning after he worked his own magic. When she glanced at Val, he was watching her, his expression knowing. She was sure he was reading her mind. Hopefully Arwen did not yet have that ability.

“Arwen and Isabel did not get on,” Val finally answered, heading to a cabinet set into the wall. He came back to the table carrying a bottle and three glasses which he placed in front of her. “This is some of our best Fae wine,” he said, pouring golden liquid into her glass. “It’s delicious and I know you will like it.”

Kat laughed. “What magic does it hold?”

Val chuckled. “It is merely wine, Kat. It might make you feel slightly more awake, but other than that, it is benign.”

Kat examined the room. The ceiling reached up and up to end in a turret, light spilling downward to bounce off the metal and glass below. She squinted in the brightness and shaded her eyes. “I miss your house, Val. The one that burned.”

He nodded as he poured himself a glass and sat next to her. “I do as well.”

Kat glanced toward the kitchens before she whispered, “Why did you allow Arwen to change the design?”

The question went unanswered as Arwen appeared carrying a platter filled with meats, cheeses, olives and bread. He looked from one to the other. “What did I miss?”

“Just setting the stage for why your mother’s here,” Val said, reaching for a piece of bread. “But before we get into all of that, how are things on Earth? Is your family safe? How is Bran?”

Kat felt a twinge of apprehension as she glanced at Arwen. The look on his face seemed over-eager, almost greedy. “Everyone’s fine at the moment, but the creature is still up in the sky. Bran left six months ago.”

Val frowned. “Why?”

“I...I told him I planned on doing this without him.”

“Doing this—you mean stopping the dark witch?”

Kat nodded, suddenly feeling guilty about all of it. Bran was the person she trusted most in the world. “I don’t know why I told him that. Dagda shamed him too. Possibly the combination of things put him over the edge.”

Val nodded slowly, looking down at the drink in his hands. He took a hefty swallow. “As I remember, aside from turning into Raven, Bran is without his god powers.”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why I worried.”

“But yours are back?”

Kat smiled. “I have so much more, Val. Danu...”

Val’s eyes widened. “You’re in touch with the mother goddess?”

Kat nodded. “And also, a life I lived long ago as a druid priestess.”

His gaze met hers. “Possibly that’s what’s bothering Bran—you’ve outshined him. Men do not normally enjoy that, not even gods and the Fae. It is a hard thing to accept.”

Kat nodded. “I suppose it could be that. He expected us to be a team. But how can we be a team when he’s so vulnerable? I would spend all my time worrying about

him instead of focusing on the mission." Kat tasted her wine, surprised by the honeyed flavor. It was just as good as Val had said it would be. "So, Val, tell me why I'm here. Is the witch in Alfheim? What have you learned?" She glanced at Arwen who seemed riveted, his eyes wide with interest.

"Arwen? Can you retrieve my notes from the library?" Val asked.

"Where are they?"

"On my desk underneath that stack of missives I'm working on. They are handwritten on yellow paper." Val turned to Kat. "This is a busy time in Alfheim. We've barely begun the process of digging ourselves out from under the terrible damage we suffered. Freyr, Alfheim's ruler, has been in touch with those of us who have land. He wants to commandeer our property for various purposes, some of which sound somewhat dubious."

"He's been threatening," Arwen supplied. "Val has been arguing with him, but so far..."

"Arwen?" Val interrupted. "I need my notes please."

Val waited to continue, watching his son rise and head off. Once the boy was out of earshot he leaned toward Kat, placing his hand on her forearm. His eyes narrowed and turned gold, his voice lowering to a near whisper. "Remember that favor you owe me?"

Before Kat could answer him, Arwen returned with a stack of papers and put them down in front of Val. "Your notes, your highness," he said, moving to his seat.

Kat was surprised by his sarcasm, but when she glanced at him, he grinned. "Occasionally Father needs to be brought down a peg," he said.

Kat didn't smile back, a shiver running down both her arms. When she looked at Val, his eyes were on his notes, but she could see that the pale skin around his neck had turned red. "What are the notes about?" she asked, rising to look over his shoulder.

Val glanced up. "I have detailed the changes happening here in a diary. The villages have been rebuilt since you were here last, but many of the Fae who were my friends have moved either to other realms or to another section of Alfheim."

"Why?"

"Because this village is a sinkhole of despondency," Arwen muttered. "Old ideas don't work in this day and age, but Father's generation seems to think they can continue in the ancient traditions as though nothing's changed."

"Are you talking about Ragnarok?" Kat asked, tearing her eyes away from the words, *destruction* and *annihilation* on the paper.

"Yes, Ragnarok!" Arwen shouted. "It signaled a new beginning, but..."

"Arwen, calm down," Val said, raising his hand. He turned to Kat. "Arwen is convinced that the terrible storms were the beginning of Ragnarok and that it's meant to clear out all of our traditions so we can start anew. But these traditions have been in place for millennia and they are here for a reason."

"Stupid things like meetings to discuss our future as a realm and rules on killing and fighting that are so outdated to be laughable? We need to use the magic we have and develop it even further. I say we let the younger generation take over."

"That is not how we do things here, Arwen. We've had this discussion a million times."

"My friends agree with me," he mumbled, looking down at the table with a scowl on his face.

“Your friends are mostly orphans who lost their parents during the latest devastation and are in a state of grief. Grief can make people act irrationally.”

Kat let out an exasperated huff and turned to face the arguing men. “The reason I’m here is because you told me if I wanted to stop the witch, I had to come now...what’s going on, Val?”

Two pairs of swirling eyes met hers, making her dizzy for a second. “It was true,” Val said unconvincingly.

Kat stood suddenly, her chair toppling over and clattering onto the stone floor. “Please do not tell me you made this up to get me here. I have a family about to go through another Ragnarok, a world that needs tending, and a missing man who I love. I don’t have time for this.”

“The witch is close. She plots your downfall as we speak. We thought it best to let you know what’s going on,” Arwen said earnestly.

Kat frowned at her son, her cheeks flaming with rage. “Please *do* go on,” she said, waving her hand in the air.

Arwen glanced at Val. “Father thinks I’m in league with her.”

“What?” Kat’s gaze went to Val.

Val shook his head, tapered fingers pushing his straight hair behind his pointed ears. “Arwen, you know that isn’t true.”

Arwen rose from the table. “It is true!” he shouted. “You think all kinds of horrible things about me!” He glanced at Kat, his eyes troubled, before he turned away from the table.

Val stood and reached out, but Arwen was already striding away. The glass door leading outside let out a clang as he walked through, swinging closed with a bang a second later.

“What is going on?” Kat whispered.

“This is why I wanted you here. I don’t trust him, but you’re his mother. I need some help sorting things out.”

“And this is the favor you mentioned.”

Val let out a sigh and returned to his seat, sinking down heavily. “Yes. Arwen has become a problem.”



