

It was a procession of sorts. Kaz remained in his draconic form and walked at Hel's side (flanking her with Garmr) while Vali and Baldr led them. If it was weird for Kaz to see Loki and Odin's sons leading, he couldn't imagine what it was like for Vali to have that reminder of what'd been done to him as an [i]ally[/i].

It was Baldr that opened the portals, Baldr that gained them access to Bifrost, and Baldr that glared at Heimdallr. "Stand aside."

"I foresaw your arrival, son of Odin, your return to Asgard." Heimdallr turned his gaze, as if he were a lighthouse, to Vali. "Even your arrival is no surprise to me but—" Taking a slow, deep breath, his hand at his side where Gjallarhorn sat, Heimdallr's prophetic eyes saw as his home, his task, and the whole of Asgard burned. "You know what the arrival of Vali the Lost, Vali the Banished, means? Today's dawn was the last before Ragnarok and its dusk will be the start of the longest night in history."

"Odin hurt them!" Baldr screamed, glaring at Heimdallr. "He killed them, he made them kill each other, and he has held court over a false peace! This, everything you're protecting, is a [i]lie![/i] There was no honor in Asgard the day Odin killed Nari, and there has been no honor in it since. Put down your horn, Heimdallr. Step aside and allow honor to return to Bifrost."

The words weren't new to Heimdallr. He saw all before it came to pass, but it wasn't supposed to be Baldr saying them. Here, in this place, one of Loki's children should have been demanding to be let through. "This is a difficult decision, Baldr. Your return was to be a happy event. You would have been praised for outwitting Hel and returning triumphant." He didn't want to say his vision of the future was growing hazy and dull, but the closer to this event—to Ragnarok—the world got, the less reliable was his perception. "As an Æsir, you are bid welcome to Asgard."

Kaz watched Heimdallr remove his hand from the horn and step to the side. It seemed like an important moment.

"But this once only. Know this, son of Odin, you will no longer be welcome on Bifrost or in my home. Find another way home." It was all Heimdallr could do to retain his honor and fulfill his duties. He was no more breaking the commands he'd been given than he had when he allowed Hel to visit her father. A shiver of revelation passed through him as he gazed at the young dragon at Hel's side as they walked past him. When they were gone, headed into Asgard, he finally said the name he knew in his heart to be part of a grand ruse, "Blasa..."

When they were well away from the bridge, Hel said, "He recognized you, Kaz."

"I don't care. He's protecting them, Hel. He might have given a little ground here, but that doesn't excuse him." Kaz shrugged his shoulders—not easy for a quadruped while walking.

"He has his honor," Baldr said, finding interest in the conversation. "He would never abandon his post. We were lucky my speech worked."

"Honor has no weight when you allow bad things to be done. What was done to Vali and Nari wasn't right. What is being done to Loki isn't right either. If it cost every shred of honor I had, I'd undo the wrongs in an instant." Kaz spat the words out, feeling disgust for the idea of honor that would make people protect monsters like Odin.

Reaching her hand out to Kaz's shoulder, Hel tried to sooth him. "You sound so much like father, Kazuma."

Looking back at Kaz, Vali nodded his head. "He does. I see why you chose him to walk beside you."

"That's one of the more astounding things about this—I didn't choose him, Vali. His mentor brought him to me to save him. His philosophies are entirely his own and I would have it no other way."

The talk over his head would feel far more condescending to Kaz if those doing it weren't actual, literal gods. Ruffling his wings, he figured the best thing to do was to keep quiet.

The walk took probably the better part of an hour. Kaz listened only partly to the half-siblings as they reminisced. All his senses were spread out around them. Even the slightest twitch of magic made his thoughts focus on and examine the event. So, when Loki's scream of agony shook the foundation of the world, he almost passed out. It hurt so much.

Hands held Kaz. A voice in his head pleaded with him to wake up, then more from outside did too.

□Kaz, you need to get up. They're worried about you. Please tell them you're okay.□ Miaow's own senses were fizzing and she'd only caught a fraction of the god's anguished scream.

"Kaz? Kaz?"

Hel's calling of his name finally stirred Kaz and got him to lift his head and look around.

"We need to move fast. I don't want my father to ever feel that amount of pain again." Pulling a dragon to its feet wasn't easy, but with Vali and Baldr's help, Hel got him up and moving.

"S-Sorry," Kaz said. "I don't know if I can ever get used to that."

"Don't get used to it."

The last of the walk into the cave felt somehow triumphant to Kaz. He'd felt like he'd been given a quest to do and here he was back to say [i]I've done it.[/i]

In the cave Loki was still bound to the stone, but the sight of Baldr seemed to drive him wild. "You! I'll—" Whatever else he'd planned to say died on his lips as Vali walked in. Patting Baldr on the shoulder, his lost son approached the stone to which he was bound. "Vali?"

While Vali approached his father, Baldr felt a tug toward the other side of the stone. Leaning over it, he drew his dagger and felt fate grip the hilt along with his own hand.

Time seemed to freeze in the cave. Everyone realized that Baldr held a knife over Loki, but despite all their speed and reaction, it was only Loki who could respond—he smiled.

The knife came down with the finality of a thunderbolt. Striking the entrails that bound Loki to the stone, it severed the enchanted flesh and freed the god. Dropping the dagger and stepping back, staggered, Baldr dropped to one knee. "I have attempted to regain some of the honor lost the day you were bound. Rise, Loki, you are free."

Sitting up, the first thing Loki did as he inhaled his first free breath in what felt like an eternity was to grab the snake in his hand and crush its neck. "You were not the instigator of this, Baldr. It was folly and a misunderstanding that saw you die, and for that I'm greatly sorry, but I hope my daughter has acted in my stead to remove the stain from my honor?"

"I have had long to think of that day. Everyone was wrong. My mother shouldn't have gone to the lengths she did to protect me. Hodur should not have thrown the spear. The others shouldn't have encouraged him. You shouldn't have given it to him. Father—Odin—should have claimed my soul and taken me to Valhalla." Looking from Loki to Hel, Baldr spared a small smile. "Of Hel, though, I hold only the highest regard. While Odin raged and screamed about vengeance, she took me somewhere safe and brought me mead with her own hands."

Kaz saw the look pass between the two only because he was removed from the tension in the cave. He felt a mild hit of self-reproving embarrassment for having made a pass at Hel himself without knowing that her heart already held room for another.

□ I'm too scared to even think. This is it, isn't it? □ Miaow asked.

□ This is the start of Ragnarok. □ The thought, once he loosed it, seemed to solidify the moment in reality. To Kaz, the world now felt different around him—more wild and feral. As if to support this new sensation, a great howl started outside.

"Fen?!" Loki was on his feet before the howl ended. He rushed out of the cave and each step called his armor and weapons to him. Daggers, his vest, a great cloak, and tight pants seemed to clasp themselves to him as he entered what had become night.

Sigyn, the last to leave and now freed of her duty to protect her husband from the snake's venom, smiled at the cool night air. Something felt strange to her, though. "Shouldn't it be daytime?"

It wasn't Fenrisulfr that had howled, it was Hati as he soared across the sky to where his brother was ripping up the goddess Sol.

Kaz couldn't fight the call of the wolves. Shedding his draconic form, becoming a huge and imposing warg, he leapt into the sky and howled as he followed the call of the wolves. It was a wild day, now night, and his blood ran hot as he reached the location of the kill.

□ Stop, Kaz! This is—□ Miaow shoved aside at Kaz with all her strength. She pushed and wrestled him and the wolf and shoved them both in the back of her mind. Glaring at the two big warg brothers feasting on Sol, she huffed out a breath. "Kaz isn't ready for this. I don't know if I'm ready for this."

Hati paused for a moment, long enough to nod, before he returned to his feast.

Turning away, Miaow picked her griffon form and took back to the sky—a dimly lit sky, now that the sun was gone from this world. "This is enough for now. I think they can handle the rest from here. I doubt there will be more fights for some time."

Without another word, Miaow ripped open a hole in reality and flew through it back to their own yard—and promptly crashed into the ground, tumbled twice, and landed in the pool.

The shock of getting wet, as opposed to simply cold, jolted Miaow awake. She flailed a little until a strong pair of arms caught her and lifted her onto the shore.

"It's not often I get a beautiful woman falling into my lap." Eisaku couldn't hold back his own laughter as he pulled Miaow all the way out. Sniffing, he wrinkled up his nose. "I prefer the mermaid form, if I'm honest. Had nicer breasts... Had breasts at all."

"Sorry I don't conform to your ideal standard, Eisaku... But, thank you." Coughing up a little water, she shook her head and leaned up as if to kiss Eisaku, then licked his cheek with her abrasive tongue.

"Ugh! Damn you, wench! You—you harpy lover!" Even as he said it, Eisaku was smiling. He had come to enjoy the quiet life, even if it wasn't so quiet, particularly when Miaow gave him a show every now and again. A little dignity might be the price, but it was a price he was willing to spend. While he pretended to wipe griffon saliva from his face, he asked, "How did it go?"

A deep breath later and Miaow said, "Ragnarok has begun."

[hr]

Kaz woke, slowly, sprawled out and feeling rested. A quick check found Miaow quiet in his head, purring very softly in sleep. Further exploration discovered he had ten toes and ten fingers,

arms, legs, breasts, and everything else that would slot him firmly into the box that most people would call [i]woman[/i].

On his stomach two heads lay. Tilting his head up to look, he saw Jaybird and Puff, both similarly dressed to him—both still asleep. Laying back fully, Kaz smiled up at the ceiling and slowly, without a hint of worry, drifted back to sleep.

He woke, some time later, to the feel of a beak nibbling at his lips. Opening his eyes revealed Puff now pressing her advantage and making it a full kiss. If kissing a beak had been strange when Kaz had first started as a shapeshifter, it wasn't anymore. It wasn't exactly a chaste kiss, but there wasn't the raw passion he knew that Miaow would inspire her to give. Puff was simply being friendly.

"Mmm. Wake up, Kaz, you have a visitor." Turning, and without any clothing on still, Puff made her way back out into the kitchen. "He's coming, but give him a moment."

Kaz was more than a little curious. He carefully slid Jaybird's head onto a pillow without waking her, then slipped off the bed. Looking down at himself, he shrugged and reached for some shorts, a bra, and a shirt. The last thing he grabbed before leaving the room was his phone. "Miaow, you even got my phone charging? Whoever said bakeneko are evil needs to be introduced to a dragon or three."

A quick shift to make his hair spill down his back in perfect green tresses, and Kaz walked out into the kitchen—to see death itself. "Hey, Mal. Before you get all frazzled and ask, yes."

Mal stared for a moment before she finally connected the dots. "Making some changes, Kazuma?"

"You know that thing, where you go to bed wearing clothes and wake up still in them—but then you find out someone is waiting for you and you look at the shirt that's out of shape and your pants that have a stain on them?" Shrugging his shoulders, Kaz walked past the kitchen table where Mal was seated and put two slices of bread in the toaster. "I kinda expected you. The lost son was found, his curse lifted, and he walked with a new blood brother into Asgard and together they freed Loki."

Mal watched Kaz do mundane morning things while he described the end of a mythology's era. He got some butter from the fridge, then some grape jelly while Puff wove around him, making coffee. Coffee that, even to Mal's half-dead body, smelled amazing.

"If I live forever, Mal—If I survive until this planet melts in the sun's warm embrace—If I decide to go elsewhere and live even past that—I will never forget the agony of Loki's screams as that venom did its best to kill him. No creature should be tortured so, and especially no god." Lifting his eyes from his hands when he noticed movement in the hall, Kaz smiled at the sight of Jaybird walking toward the kitchen.

Jaybird felt the presence of Mal before they reached the kitchen, but they were damned if they were going to let the old lich ruin the morning. Walking across the kitchen, Jaybird gave a smile to Mal and turned all her attention to Kaz.

Considering shifting to male and ignoring the bra, to conform more to Jaybird's preferences, Kaz watched them get closer and caught the excited/hungry look in Jaybird's eyes.

A little tweet of a giggle got from Puff's beak as she plunged the French press and started pouring coffee. "Would you like a cup?" she asked Mal.

"Actually, I would like one, if there's some extra?" Mal normally liked sweet things, which was to say her sense of taste was starting to fail her and she was in the process of burning vast quantities of time and effort into undoing the process. "Five sugars, please."

Puff, doing as terrible a job of hiding her joy as she did her modesty, poured four coffees, added an ungodly amount of sugar to two of them, and a straw to one of those—all before Kaz and Jaybird were done with their kiss. She passed them their cups. "Sleep well?"

Taking their coffee, Jaybird nodded. "Yeah, it was cozy. A little loud though." Walking to the table and grabbing a seat, they asked, "So, Mal, what's up?"

The relaxed attitude should have grated on Mal, except this wasn't her domain. This was the home of what she could probably pin the title [i]demigod[/i] and would get few arguments. "I like to keep on top of things, as you know, and I thought it best to get confirmation directly." Sipping the coffee, she let out a soft death-rattle sigh. "That's wonderful."

Beaming with delight, Puff set her own cup down and produced her phone from the little pouch it lived in under her left wing. A moment later she had a photo of the steaming cup posted online.

Kaz, realizing that Mal was watching Puff intently while she posted the picture. A note of panic hit as he wondered if she knew of Puff's social media presence. Then Mal's phone made a chirping noise and Kaz watched her take it out and smile. It should have been a horrifying smile—one that would make children scream and grown men pause and question their life decisions—but it was genuine.

"That's a cute filter," Mal said, before she realized what was coming from her mouth.

Jerking her head up, Puff's eyes widened a moment as she realized what had happened. "I—" Sink or swim. Crash to the ground or fly from the nest. Spreading her wings (figuratively) Puff said, "Thanks! A friend showed it to me and I [i]had[/i] to have it."

Hiding her face as best she could behind her phone, Mal realized she'd been well and truly caught. A glance Kaz's way revealed a smile that told her he knew.

Kaz sipped his coffee, waited a moment, and then said, "I won't tell anyone, Mal. I don't use that [i]always tells the truth[/i] stuff either."

"I'll be honest with you," Mal said, "no one gets all that far with that shtick. As for following your social media, Puff, I had a warning from a junior faculty member that a student was leaking too much. Finding out you were not a student and were playing your audience so masterfully was reassuring. I'll admit continuing was mostly to gauge how people saw and talked about magic, finding you genuinely interesting was a bonus."

Puff, who liked attention, primped a little despite the source of it being somewhat irregular. Letting out a trill of happiness, she got up and walked around until she was beside Mal, then leaned in close to her and held out her phone. "Smile."

"Wha—?" Panic gripped Mal and she yanked back on her aura for fear of harming this amazing, carefree creature. It gave Puff enough time to snap the picture and go back to her seat. "You can't jus—"

Stopping, halfway through applying a background-smudging tool, Puff raised an eye-ridge. "You don't want me to post it?"

Mal froze. She hadn't realized both how forward Puff would be and how understanding, too. On one hand, she mused, it would be creating an association of herself and putting her image online. On the other hand, she would be in one of Puff's pictures. "Go ahead."

"Do you want me to tag you?" Tapping away, Puff added a slight blur to the picture that she used whenever she was faking a computer generated one. "Goth girl oh four, right?"

Down to nodding, Mal's ability to tell the harpy anything at all had failed.

Kaz let loose a short laugh. "She's amazing at that, you know? I haven't found anyone short of a vampire that would say no to her. You saw Freyja?"

The picture had been something new. It had earned Puff a huge spike in followers, Mal remembered, because suddenly cosplayers wanted to know where Freyja had gotten the armor, sword, and lifelike animal skins from. "Next time I'll message you."

"Next time, wear something [i]cute[/i]," Puff said.

Mal's attention snapped around. "Cute?"

"Sure! You could go with the professional look, little pencil skirt, white shirt with a few buttons showing a push-up bra. Suit jacket over the top. Oh! There's a song about this! Wear that, please?" Puff tapped [i]post[/i] on her phone and sat down, only to hear Mal's phone chirp again.

"Or you could go with the sexy-goth. Some dark makeup, a huge dress, a black veil, and crimson lipstick..."

"I don't delude myself, dear. I have given much to retain my own autonomy and power—my beauty was one such price. You can't—" Mal stopped in her tracks. Puff had swapped accounts on her phone, apparently, and was showing artwork of— "Sexy liches?"

"You'll note the tens of thousands of likes these have." Her point made, Puff put her phone back down.

Coming back to the table, Kaz set down a veritable mountain of toast, a pat of butter, and several condiments. "Dig in."

Jaybird took the first piece, buttered it lightly, and added the special strawberry jam that had extra chunky bits of pulp in it—then handed it to Puff. "Here."

Squawking in delight, Puff held the toast careful to avoid getting anything sticky on her feathers. Taking a bite, she let out a trill. "That's so good."

Mal had done what she thought was the right thing. She'd kept up with modern technology and styles, and it had paid off. She could enjoy memes, understand their references, and even make the odd one herself (not that any had become popular). But, finding out that people drew sexy art of half-undead abominations—like her—was new. She wanted nothing less than to step back, set fire to the knowledge, and walk away. But, there was a problem. "Pandora's box is open," Mal whispered, the sound similar to parchment ruffled by the wings of a hummingbird.

Relaxing into his chair, Kaz felt some stirring in his head. □Miaow? You can keep sleeping if you want. I even kissed your girlfriend good morning.□

□It's hard to believe what happened, happened. I'm going to pretend it doesn't exist for another few hours and sleep. Kiss her again for me.□

Kaz leaned over and kissed Puff on the cheek, earning him another of her happy trills. "Miaow said you deserve a kiss, and I'm inclined to agree. She's going to sleep a bit longer, though."

"She's a cat," Puff said, knowing that would explain everything. "Anything planned today, or can I go shopping with Mal and do a photo-shoot with her?"

Mal's head jerked up, her eyes wide, the first terror appearing in them for nearly a hundred years. "I have to go."

"Shopping?" Puff asked.

Seeing a harpy like Puff suddenly look more predatory than an eagle made Mal realize she wasn't dealing with a reasonable being—Puff was an elemental, the very essence of chaos. "I am not getting out of this, am I?"

Puff giggle-chirped and shook her head vehemently. "Not unless you want to miss out on your chance of being..." She trailed off as, like her breathing, she automatically checked her phone. "Oh, your picture is doing numbers."

It was a normal day for Kaz. Yesterday and the days before it had been the important ones. He ate his breakfast and drank some coffee, flirted with his partner, and put off the knowledge that he'd have to contact Hel as something to do [i]later[/i].

He gladly accepted a hug and peck on the cheek from Puff when she left with Mal.

After nearly thirty seconds of the front door closing, Jaybird finally asked, "Did Puff just take Mal shopping?"

"Yesterday I helped start Ragnarok," Kaz said. He took another bite of toast and said around it, "This isn't so bad."

Giggling, Jaybird nodded along. "That—That is one way to not be surprised at life."

"It's not going to work, though. Ragnarok has started, and that means a lot of big changes. All sides are recruiting fighters to aid them."

"Like you?"

"Huh?"

Jaybird smirked and pointed at Kaz. "You. Hel recruited you."

Kaz opened his mouth to refute it, but stopped. "Yeah. I guess. But saving my life, a few times now, makes me biased."

"Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"I'd save all of them if I could. I want to fight at Hel's side in whatever war she takes her army to, but Jormungandr helped so much with Vali. I don't know if I can do anything in Loki's fight—it seems too much for me to tip the balance. Fenrisulfr—"

"Kazuma, you're not thinking about this right." At Kaz's look of surprise, Jaybird rolled their eyes. "You are focused on fighting—personally. Don't. It will only take one bad choice and you will be lost for good."

Kaz kept looking at them as if Jaybird were going to share a great answer of life.

"Ugh, do I have to spell it out? Look for small things you can do to tip the balance—like you did with starting Ragnarok. Sleipnir." This time Jaybird could see the realization dawn. "I'm sure there are other not-fights you could help with. Kaz, you're sneaky—use that."

□ Jaybird's right, Kaz. Don't get me wrong, you're a good fighter—as good as you could be with the time you've been training—but against a warrior like Thor? I'd rather we not die to a backhand. □ Stretching out in Kaz's mind, Miaow was inclined to passively listen to the conversation, and only inject important things from time to time.

"Do you know of any others?" Kaz asked.

"Vidar would be a good target to kill before the fighting starts. He was destined to kill Fenrisulfr after the wolf kills Odin. With him still alive, even injured, much could be tipped in the war. If you could convince Surtr to aid Jormangandr instead of setting Midgard on fire... You are going to need standing, something to show for yourself in advance. Riding on Sleipnir would do that." Jaybird finished off their toast. "So, you'll be busy today, I guess?"

Slumping back in his chair, Kaz tipped his head back and laughed. "Well, I will be [i]now[/i]. What would I do without you?"

"Sleep in until noon and probably wind up with a goddess knocking angrily at the door." Bouncing on their seat as they shifted it around to beside Kaz, Jaybird leaned against him. "I prefer you like this. Cozy and cuddly."

"I thought you liked me when I was flying with you on my back?"

Jaybird snorted a laugh. "I can like two things, but I prefer you cuddly. As a dragon you're... you're not cuddly. Too many sharp edges."

"Toothless."

"Huh?"

Laughing, Kaz kissed Jaybird on the cheek and carefully extracted himself out from under them. "We're going to have to fix that lax education you have there. I'll pick up a movie for tonight. All four of us can snuggle and watch it together."

"Is it about a cuddly dragon?" Jaybird admired Kaz, their eyes tracing his legs as he paused at the back door. The look he gave back made Jaybird tingle. "What's it called?"

"If I told you, you'd look it up and ruin all the fun with memes. Also, no spoiling yourself by talking to Puff." Kaz blew a kiss to Jaybird and got one back before he turned and stepped

outside. That's when it hit him that [i]How To Train Your Dragon[/i]'s title alone may give Jaybird some odd messages. He laughed at that, though, and opened his portal directly to Hel's hall.

There was a change in the air. Excitement, happiness, and a generally higher morale than previous times Kaz'd been there. What drew more of his attention was the sense of power at the head of the room. Hel sat on the largest chair, her own power calling to Kaz like a flame to a moth, but on her right was Loki, on her left was Vali and Baldr—both talking amicably about something he couldn't hear. When the room around Kaz quietened, the attention of the four gods turned on him and with it their smiles.

"Brother!" Vali stood, raising his drink toward Kaz. "Come. Sit. We are making plans!"

Kaz was acutely aware of not only the attention of Hel and Loki, but also the people in the hall watching him. It took him until he reached the head table to realize why most were confused—he was still wearing the form Miaow had left him in the previous night.

Laughter, pure and joyous, rang out in the hall. Loki had spent so long in fear and misery that he barely recognized it as his own voice. "I think our young hero has a plan already put together, or do I miss my mark?"

The words twisted and shaped themselves in Kaz's head according to their own rules, and he wondered if he was really hearing English or if Loki was doing something to make himself more understandable. Either way, he didn't have a reason to hold back the ideas Jaybird had given him. "At least one, maybe two. The first is to go and free Sleipnir."

Hel shook her head. "We tried, but Odin has already taken him from his field."

Other options. Kaz mentally shifted Sleipnir to the side and thought about Vidar and Surtr. "I have some other ideas I'd like to try."

"Perhaps," Loki said, "we should tell Kazuma our plans and see what he would like to do around them?"

A new seat was produced by someone, pulled over to the table, and Kaz found himself sitting beside Loki at the table. It was beyond bizarre for him to be there, listening to Hel as she detailed her plans to ready her army to march on Asgard, or Loki and his plans to kill Heimdallr without himself succumbing to the other god's skill. Vali and Baldr seemed more intent on laughing than about explaining their idea. His mind racing Kaz tried to remember what either of them had been attested to do during Ragnarok. "I was going to go and talk to Surtr." The laughter died and all four of them stared at him. "Instead of setting fire to Midgard, I want him to fight beside Jormungandr."

"The one thing we are still sure of, despite all the changes happening, is the pairings. Thor will stand against my son, Jormungandr. Odin will fight with Fen. I will make my stand on Bifrost to

allow the sons of Muspel to cross. If we can deny Sleipnir to Odin, that may be enough to turn Fen's fight with him. If Surtr stood at Jormungandr's side, that would definitely turn the tide of that fight." Loki left his own fight's result unmentioned.

"That means I need to find Sleipnir and free him, find Surtr and secure his aid, and—" Kaz looked at Loki and tried to come up with something that didn't require him to personally wade into a fight between Loki and Heimdallr, but that was exactly what Freyja's prophecy told him he was personally destined to do. He could only interfere in one fight. "I know where my own sword will be."

Vali was the first to break the silence Kaz's words had built. He laughed, drew a long knife from his belt, and drove its point down into the table. "Father, you can't stop us. Four swords against one will win that fight."

"And if I survive that fight, I will stand beside Jormungandr!" Baldr glared at Loki, daring him to gainsay his word. When none came, he laughed. "I never before realized what the prophecy meant by brother fighting brother, at least among us, but that surely must be it."

"And I will stand with Fen," Vali said.

"Let's not count on any one event for each battle." Hel looked at Kaz. "Continue with your own schemes. It would be better to have overwhelming strength in each fight than merely a single hand tipping the scales."

Nodding, Kaz started to stand up but felt a hand on his shoulder. Loki had turned and was looking at him intently. "Uh?"

"When you go to Surtr, do not wear the form of a female unless you intend to fight him," Loki said. "Or engage with him in [i]sport[/i]."

It took Kaz a moment to realize the implication, but a moment later he was subjected to Loki's laughter. "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Miaow's own laughter echoed inside Kaz's head. □ He got you good, but then that was considered his domain. He got under the other gods' skin so much they tied him to a rock. □

Sitting a bit straighter, Loki looked closer at his dinner companion. "Whom is that? Your little feline friend? Why doesn't she come out so we can get a better look at her?" It would only be a temporary working, but Loki felt confident he could manage it—especially in his daughter's home. Focusing on that inner being, he took Kaz's right arm and used it to shape a form that she would feel comfortable in. [i]She[/i], Loki thought. "No wonder you are so easy to tease."

Watching his own arm break free, Kaz stared at it in horror as it reshaped into a house cat. His arm was still missing, so he only had one hand left to pet her. "Hey, Miaow."

Staring up at Kaz, then Loki, Miaow felt disconnected from everything she'd taken as fact. "What? How?!" The only reason she wasn't actually freaking out, though, was the excellent petting she got.

Shrugging, Loki smiled. "It's only temporary. You could probably do it yourselves."

"I've never tried removing part of myself before." Trying to sense around for the missing limb, Kaz felt like it was still there, still moving, and not now a feline shape. "I can kinda see how it works, but splitting our minds like this is strange. It's so quiet."

Narrowing her eyes, Miaow jumped up to Kaz's shoulders and curled around his neck—purring loudly. "Is this better?"

The purring wasn't in his head, but it did help having her right there. "Yeah, it is. Thanks, Miaow." He stopped trying to poke at the change, instead just calming himself down. "I wonder if I could convince Fafnir to carry me to meet him?"

Loki blinked a few times, barely comprehending what Kaz had said. "Fafnir? Angry dwarf that tried to kill Thor and myself? Turned into a dragon by myself? Hunted forever by those seeking his gold or his head? That Fafnir?"

"He taught me how to manipulate magic so that I could free Vali."

It was a surprise to hear. Loki took more notice of Kaz and saw the way his aura flickered with the features of so many creatures, chief among them were dragons and wolves—but also a cat. "When I face my end, I think a true regret would be never having unraveled your life story, Kazuma."

"Then I'll just have to make sure you don't face it soon." Kaz brought his hand up and started rubbing Miaow's ears. He was about to say something else, but felt a tugging at his vacant shoulder. "What—?"

Miaow gasped as she was dragged bodily to Kaz's side and felt her new body start to melt and reshape itself. "Drat. I was just getting us—" □...ed to that. Oh well, now we have something new to practice.□

□Yup. Need to work on duration and maybe growing a new limb to use specifically for this, so I don't need to get used to losing an arm.□

"Kazuma," Hel said, "if you have plans, you can take your leave. We don't need you here to reminisce, get drunk, and curse at each other."

"We're not that bad, Hel," Baldr said a moment before barking with laughter. "It is good to be [i]alive[/i] again, and even if I anticipate having to slay my brothers, today I am going to get so drunk I will not be able to get out of this chair! Go, have fun in your own way, [i]Litit Brodir[/i]. We will still be here when you are done."

The words Baldr used felt like they had impact, like they were yet another name Kaz had been branded with. [i]Litit Brodir[/i], he could discern the roots easily enough, [i]Little Brother[/i]. He grinned and accepted the term in the light it was given. "Then I believe I have a dragon to talk to."

Standing up from his seat, Kaz took his top and his bra off, stepped out of his shorts and panties, stuffed it all into a pocket of his knapsack and drew his form out and into that of his dragon self.

Hel caught her father watching Kaz as he flew from the hall. She leaned over, closer to him. "It's an odd thing. His shapechanging is beautiful to watch, and while he did make me an offer once, he is spoken-for now."

Not bothering to look away from the dragon in flight, Loki chuckled warmly. "I have a wife and a mistress, I don't need another for my bed. It is nice to have a pretty young thing around to look at, though." He moved on quickly before his daughter could so much as get a word out. "Don't berate me. I have two women in my life who have [i]far better ammunition[/i] to do that."

Hel was on the verge of fighting back verbally when she realized how very stupid that was. Instead, she grabbed her own mug and lifted it to her lips—and drank the thing to the dregs. It was not the time for arguments yet, maybe in a few more drinks' time.

[hr]

Focusing his attention, Kaz opened a rip in the world at the entrance of Hel's hall and flew through it into the frozen sky of Niflheim. The chill air scoured his lungs and seared into his flesh—he loved it so much.

□ I know you enjoy this, but flying loops and spirals? Really? □ Miaow asked with a purring giggle.

"Don't complain, Miaow. I know you enjoy it too." As a dragon, Kaz felt more fluid than in any other form. He was sinuous as a snake as he flew, body jerking around as he adjusted the air around him with the mana his body gathered.

"Come with me, Spakr!"

Kaz had barely noticed Fafnir flying nearby, but when he'd called to him, Kaz banked hard to match his speed to Fafnir's and settle into a position to use the bigger dragon's wake to aid him.

Working together, their mana flowed out and around each other, guiding their passage through the air.

Every time Kaz saw Fafnir produce a portal rift, it amazed him at how clean it was. The gateway was barely noticeable and the mana around it felt natural. Though, when they passed through it, both of them had to pull up sharply and stop before they would slam into a tree.

Not merely a tree, Kaz corrected, but [i]the[/i] tree. It was huge. Sky scrapers would be jealous of the circumference and the height of the tree. It stretched up from roots bigger than Stratfield's magic college into a canopy above that blotted out the sky.

"Yggdrasil," Fafnir said, then turned and started flying down toward the roots.

What astounded Kaz the most was the mana flow. The tree had its own monstrous mana manipulations that coiled around it, pushed its metabolic processes, and had complete and utter disdain for his and Fafnir's mana. Their own weaving, when the tree's mana touched it, was destroyed and scattered.

Then, as Hel had trained him to, Kaz saw the first inkling of corruption in the tree. One root in particular wasn't directing a huge flow of life-giving mana upward—its mana was that of poison and death.

Landing on the odd root beside Fafnir, Kaz waited for his mentor to explain.

A dull sound started beneath Kaz's feet. He felt the poisonous mana twist and focus to a point before them. Then, like a boil splitting open, the wood rotted from within, split, and disgorged a giant beast.

As big as two Fafnirs end on end, the huge winged worm searched around with its blind head. "Fafnir!"

"Yes, Nidhoggr. And Spakr too." Fafnir nudged Kaz with a talon and a trickle of mana. "We're here to discuss events."

Curling its grinding maw, dripping with acid and venom, Nidhoggr nodded and smiled.

"[i]Ragnarok has begun![/i]" It sensed something about the lesser dragon beside Fafnir. For a moment its mind rolled and squirmed, tasting the fate bleeding off Kaz. "You caused it! Ha ha! A dragon caused Ragnarok!"

"Yes. Spakr found the lost son of Loki, restored his form, and brought him to his father across Bifrost." The momentous event being attributed to Kaz made Fafnir feel proud of his pupil. "And now it is time to meet with our cousin."

Nidhoggr writhed and twisted. It hadn't left Yggdrasil for a long time, but the [i]cousin[/i] Fafnir mentioned was a greater wyrm still, and would require a short absence from the tree. "Open a portal, Fafnir, and we will meet."

"Away from this damned tree, Nidhoggr. Even your poison does not slow its blighted mana." Spreading his wings, Fafnir took to the sky to be followed by Kaz and Nidhoggr. A small portal wouldn't do for the giant wyrm that was with them, so he ripped a huge hole in reality and brought the three of them out above Midgard.

Kaz ignored the other two dragons and tucked his wings for a dive. As he neared the ground, he spread his wings out again and pumped them hard to arrest his fall and let him drop lightly to the ground. As soon as his foot made contact, Kaz felt the shiver of excitement from Jormungandr. "Fafnir and Nidhoggr are coming." The excitement turned into an earthquake.

Sitting down on the ground beside Kaz, Fafnir waited for the third member to land before he raised his voice. "Jormungandr! The time has come! Ragnarok is upon us and you must travel to Muspelheim!"

Having long since spread himself out over the entirety of Midgard, Jormungandr unclasped his jaws and released his tail. His spine was the backbone of mountain ranges; his coils hills, rivers, and cliffs; and his head—when he raised it high—saw the three dragons awaiting him. Now that his mouth wasn't so busy, Jormungandr spoke. "I felt it when you took my brother home, Kazuma."

Jormungandr didn't speak at a normal pace, Kaz realized, and nor did his voice simply consist of sound. The winds of Midgard were part of him and the rumble of its stones were his own doing. He sounded like an earthquake would if it were to converse. "You protected Vali for so long, then watched over us while I freed him. Thank you."

Jormungandr, careful not to crush Kaz with his coils, instead contented himself with a huge mana-working to infuse Kaz with a wealth of power. "I have long since had an agreement with you, Fafnir, to bear me to Muspelheim on this day. You will honor it now?"

Flashing his fangs in a smile, Fafnir nodded. "Of course. Though I think Spakr has another idea."

Jormungandr was massive beyond any ability to comprehend a creature as being big, but that didn't stop Kaz from walking closer until he could lean in and press his forehead against a coil. "We all know what your destiny is. Thor will fight you, will kill you—"

"And I will have the last word and kill Thor. What of it?" Jormungandr asked.

"Everyone has their part to play," Kaz said, letting his word hang, "but me. I had Freyja search out my future and tell it to me. I will make a difference, directly, in one fight. But I believe I can affect more indirectly. If I can, I will seek to secure Surtr's aid in your fight."

Silence reigned for some time as each of the dragons took that in. Finally, it was Fafnir who said, "He will not do that lightly."

"I will offer him a favor, one I can personally accomplish and at the time of his pleasing. I'll explain to him that, as a young dragon, the longer he waits to call the favor in, the more impressive it will be." Kaz looked around the group, focusing last on Fafnir. "The only other restriction will be the favor will not harm or hinder my family."

"And your family is?" Nidhoggr asked.

Kaz considered the group he most valued. "Dragonkind—you three, Hel and hers, and those I live with on Earth as well as my father."

Bowing its head, Nidhoggr let out a grumbling rumble that sounded like slow laughter. "Your name speaks true."

Shaking his head, Fafnir did not agree. "And if he asks you to kill important people on Earth?"

"That would hinder my family." Shrugging his shoulders, Kaz smiled in a way that showed teeth. At the continued stern look from Fafnir, Kaz let out a sigh. "You think I should alter it?"

Snorting, Fafnir gestured to Kaz's mouth. "Nothing that would harm anybody. You do yourself a disservice, Spakr. You freed the son of Loki from Odin's curse and set Ragnarok in motion—you are not merely your talons and teeth. You learned the ways of draconic magic from myself, but in some ways you have surpassed me."

It was a bit of a shock to hear, but Kaz could see the angle Fafnir was using to salve his ego. "We'll see. I'll try offering that first."

"Then, if we're ready?" Fafnir grinned, eyes blazing with anticipation. When there were no challenges, he opened a portal to Muspelheim.

When Kaz jumped through the portal, after the others, the first thing he was aware of was heat—oppressive heat. Flicking at his mana, he adjusted it to draw heat out of the air and shift it away from him. "Why does it always need to be fire?"

"Sometimes I wonder, Spakr, if you have too much wolf in you," Fafnir said, stretching his wings out, arching his back, and roaring into the sky.

No sooner did Fafnir let loose his cry than Nidhoggr and Jormungandr followed suit, and that much raw draconic energy in the air stirred Kaz to the point where he added his voice too. With a growing flood of power thrumming around them, they continued their cry until a howl joined their song. Then two more lupine voices joined in.

Kaz recognized the howls of Hati and Skoll, but the greater wolf howl chilled the blood in his veins. A tear opened in the space between worlds, and a huge howling wolf stepped through. From the sky, two more joined their father to stand opposite the dragons.

"Hroovitr! Vanagandr! Fenrisulfr!" Jormungandr called, naming the giant wolf three times. At last, though, there was one name he wanted to use: "Brother!"

Having Fenrisulfr charging at them could do nothing but fill Kaz with panic—until Jormungandr's coils lashed out and snatched the huge wolf from the ground, coiling around him again and again. He turned his attention to Hati and Skoll as they walked over at a more sedate pace. "Your hunt went well?"

"The sun and moon are no more!" Hati said, tilting his head up to look at the sky. "That ripped up all bonds. New agreements will be forged!"

"It also broke Gleipnir." Skoll leaned over and shoved his shoulder against his brother's. "Miaow didn't want you to partake of the feast with us?"

□ No I did not. □ Miaow lashed her tail at that. □ It would have—□

□ Changed me. I know, Miaow. Thank you for that. I couldn't control myself with both of them hunting and calling. □ Imagining himself butting his head gently against hers, Kaz thanked Miaow in a feline way as well as with words. "She acted according to my wishes, Skoll. Devouring a god might be something I'm ready for, but I want to be myself and fully aware if I do it."

Hati howled in support—a brief one. "Well put! You cannot properly feast without having your heart and head in it."

The heat seemed to peak around them noticeably. Kaz turned from Hati and Skoll and saw a huge form striding closer. Huge, armored, carrying a sword that was as long as he was tall, and a huge round shield—the man-shaped-thing got closer and closer, and ever larger, until it stopped not far from where their group was.

"Fenrisulfr! Jormungandr!" Surtr's voice made the entirety of Muspelheim tremble, though he was pleased to see the beings before him stood their ground. "It is time." Not a question, oh no. Surtr knew that the only reason Loki's children would gather would be to help him and his army smash through to Asgard. "But first, while Muspell's Sons and Daughters gather, let us toast to the fight ahead and prepare ourselves for the dealing of death!"

Moving with the group, Kaz fell-in beside Fafnir. "Who is that, Miaow?"

"If I had to guess, it's Surtr. He's the leader of Muspelheim. I think this is a major step toward some of the big fights of Ragnarok. Like, this is big, Kaz."

"Yeah, this is moving fast. Didn't Hel say this would take years? I really only wanted to talk to Surtr about events—not get the ball rolling."

"You could back out. Leave things alone and let the normal order of events unfold." Miaow expected the recoil Kaz had at that idea. "Not your thing, I know. So the only other option is to hit the ground running and move ahead."

"Surf the wave, yeah." The conversation had taken moments, Kaz was relieved to see, but he had still lagged a little behind the other dragons. Bounding to catch up, Kaz reached Fafnir's side and slowed back to a normal pace. "This seems to be moving fast, don't you think?"

Fafnir could do nothing but chuckle at Kaz's words. "Spakr, this is moving fast. I would not have moved as quickly nor be planning what I am if not for a young human—now a dragon—who taught me what it means to enjoy life beyond the coin you can hoard."

The way Fafnir put it surprised Kaz almost as much as him having said it at all. He looked up at the larger dragon and noticed he didn't look so much smug as merely a bit self-satisfied. "Now I know you're an impostor," Kaz said. When Fafnir raised an eyeridge at him, he let out a laugh. "I guess if it's my own fault, I need to own it and move on."

The home of the fire giant was, typically, huge. Kaz was in awe of the scale of it as they walked inside a huge hall inside a hollowed out mountain. Inside and past the huge stone doors that were half again as tall as Surtr, hundreds of giants were checking their weapons and armor. Kaz felt humbled by all of it as he followed in Fafnir's wake.

And at the end of the hall Surtr stopped and took his throne. It was huge, made of steel and rock, and Kaz could see where the metal of the seat had melted beneath Surtr.

"You have prepared long for this day," Fafnir said, winding his way among the jotun warriors.

"Yes! Too long has Odin, his sons, and all the Æsir shown contempt of all others. Tell me, Fafnir, where are the battle lines drawn? To which side do the Vanir stand?" Turning his sword point down, Surtr plunged it into the floor at his side.

"Spakr would know better than me. Tell us!" Fafnir moved to the side to leave Kaz revealed before Surtr's gaze.

The weight of the fire giant's attention was heavy, but Kaz had spoken with gods already. Ruffling his wings, he only had one bit of news. "Freyja and her army will heed the call of house Loki. Of the rest, I have no idea."

"Ha! This will make for a mighty fight! It will split the Valkyrie in half if she commits against Odin! You are not a wyrm I have seen before. Spakr, was it?"

Bowing his head, Kaz was about to reply when Fafnir cut him off.

Fafnir smirked as he gestured at Kaz with a wing. "Spakr, also known as the mage Kazuma, and I have heard the name Blasa spoken about him too. You have him to thank for starting Ragnarok."

Jumping to his feet, Surtr let out a thunderous roar. "A toast, then, to the wyrm that relieved the boredom!" The room exploded into laughter around the group even as Surtr lifted a huge goblet and drank a huge gulp of the expanse of liquid within. "Tell us of this deed while the sons of Muspel ready themselves for war."

With the entire hall listening, Kaz started his story. He decided, if he wanted to ask Surtr a favor, he should offer something big first—so he began his tale with his arrival at the magic college. Everything was included, he left little out.

Surtr was enthralled by the story of a young mortal and his rise to being a dragon and then the epic tale of returning Vali to his birthright. Hearing of Baldr's allegiance drew a cheer from the room that he enthusiastically joined in. Finally, when the story drew to the final part—of stepping into Surtshellir, his hall—Surtr banged his fist on the throne. "A fine tale that the skalds will tell of—if they live!" Another round of laughter chased on the heels of his words until he had to bang his throne again to silence the room. "Where do you plan to fit yourself into the coming battle?"

"I have some more tasks before I get to pick a fight. I plan to find Sleipnir and free him from Thor, but first I wanted to ask if you'd consider altering [i]your[/i] plans a little." It was the best chance Kaz had to bring up the topic. He watched Surtr consider him, then nod in his direction once. "Leave off your fight with Freyr. Fighting a man with no weapon brings little honor."

Narrowing his eyes, Surtr studied the small dragon. His first reaction was to laugh and call Kaz a coward for daring to suggest he not fight the one he was destined to, but he suspected a name like [i]Spakr[/i] was earned for a reason. "And?"

Kaz hoped that his suggestion would be taken well. "As it stands now, Thor is destined to fight, and die, with Jormungandr. Don't you think his head would be better placed on your sword?"

The room quietened around them. Everyone wanted to hear the outcome of the suggestion. Surtr liked the idea. His fight with Freyr had soured ever since news of the god's amazing sword being stolen. "And then what. We kill him and celebrate victory?"

"Fenrisulfr has an opening on his dance card after he kills Odin. It is said Odin's son will avenge his father with an attack that will lead Fen to starve. I don't think that is very deserving of the hero of such a fight." Kaz had learned one or two things about dealing with those of the Norse mythos—and his turning his head to spit a frozen icicle into the nearby fire was what he hoped showed how much contempt he had for the act. "If I have to, I'll stand by his side myself."

Now Surtr found himself wanting to scream in support of the dragon's words. Fire boiled inside him and he was prepared to support the cause of honor. "But what will that mean after the fighting ends? Jormungandr, Fenrisulfr, Freyr—they were not meant to live. The prophecies—"

"Fuck the prophecies!" Kaz glared at Surtr, daring him to challenge the attitude. "Did Odin think of the prophecies when he sought every avenue he could to twist his way out of the grip Fen's jaws promised?" His voice echoed through the hall. "Because if Odin had found a way, do you think he wouldn't use it even if it cost [i]everyone[/i] their lives? Fighting beside your allies, honoring the victors"—as he spoke, Kaz gestured first to Jormungandr and then Fenrisulfr—"this sounds like what the warriors of Muspelheim were born for. And, if there is room for more fighting after Ragnarok—then I scarcely think that will be a problem for anyone here. We don't want to create some peaceful utopia."

"We want blood, respect, and a damn good fight."

Silence rang out in the hall for a minute before Surtr started banging his sword's hilt against the arm of his throne. More giants around the room started stomping their feet, raising their voices into a shout. His eyes glowing with flames that reflected the fire Kaz had lit inside him, Surtr stood up and raised his sword above his head. "For an outsider, you know the hearts of warriors well. This is what the sons and daughters of Muspel have done for thousands of years, and we welcome it for thousands more. Very well, let's fight and honor the old traditions. Brothers and sisters, we will raid Asgard our way, with our honor, and the prophecies be damned!"

Fafnir leaned over and brought his head beside mine. "You handled that well, and not a single promise was required. I'll make a greedy dragon out of you yet."

"How long will this take here?" Kaz asked. "I need to find Freyr and convince him to leave Surtr alone."

Tilting his head a little in confusion, Fafnir asked, "Freyr? Why would you need to do that? He wouldn't—"

"One thing, Spakr!" Surtr's voice cut through the chatter of the room and drew Kaz's attention. "Freyr still needs to pay for Beli. Slay him or bring me his finest sword as blood money."

Kaz was well aware his magic was translating words for him. It worked so well normally that he barely noticed it. This time, though, he picked up on something. "Blood money?" he asked Fafnir.

"A payment to avoid a duel. The reason Surtr wanted to kill Freyr was to pay him back for the Jotun Beli."

"Oh. I guess I'm going there to tell him that, then." Things were becoming complicated. Kaz thought he'd gotten off without having to do anything for Surtr, but here he was adding stuff to his list. "Surtr! I will carry him your message and bring back what you ask."