

I was working when Loki came to visit. This wasn't unusual; I didn't sleep, and eating was a rare necessity. I could, and often did, work for days at a time.

Life was simpler that way.

I felt it when he manifested himself in my workshop, although I didn't turn away from my work. It was a simple lump of metal at the moment, not even fully refined yet. Closer to ore than bullion, really. When I was finished with it, it would be a fine golden bauble, such as any rich woman would be pleased to wear.

I felt a momentary frustration at the thought. In comparison to the works I'd once crafted, it felt so...petty.

I pushed the feeling away. I'd made this choice for a reason. It might be petty, spending my time on baubles, but it was still better than what I'd once done. Baubles do no harm.

I'd almost finished refining the metal when Loki sighed. "You're an ass," he said. "You know that, right, Dvalin?"

I grunted and turned the metal over in my hands. It flowed under my fingers, the last of the waste running out and leaving gold behind. I ignored the dross for the moment; I would extract any valuable materials from it later.

"Of course," Loki said. "More time for me to talk, then. And I want to talk about the kid."

I looked at the god for the first time since he manifested. He was wearing a slender Nordic body, something that would have looked quite at home on a longship back in the day. His shadow gave the lie to the mask, though, at least to my eye. It was the shadow of something far larger, a hulking beast that couldn't have walked through the garage door of the shop. He breathed and the shadow moved in unison, and just the movement of the shadow was enough to rattle tools on the workbenches.

I wondered whether he was putting on a show for my benefit. Surely he could have concealed this sign of his power, if he wanted to. I was old, but clairvoyance and divination had never been my specialties; I knew better than to imagine I could see beneath his mask if he didn't want me to.

"The boy is none of your business," I said at last, turning my attention back to the metal in my hands.

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. I've made an investment in him. That makes him my business, quite literally."

I grunted. "Out with it, then."

"As you know, the child is attracting the attention of more people than just myself." Loki's voice was a purr now, smooth as silk. "If he wants to survive that attention, he's going to need a weapon."

"I don't make weapons." Not anymore, I didn't. I'd had enough of weapons.

"Fortunately," Loki said, and now there was something in his voice that was sharp enough to make me look at him again, "I wasn't thinking of a new weapon. I had something old in mind. Something *very* old, even."

I knew what he meant, and it was serious enough that I set the lump of gold down and turned to face him. "You know what that sword is for," I said. "You know what it does to people. And you want me to give it to someone I give half a damn about?"

"He's going up against a Twilight Prince this time," Loki said with a twisted smile. In the background, his smile grinned as well, showing teeth the size and shape of swords. "He's going to need a weapon that poses a threat to them, if he wants them to take him seriously."

I grunted again, thinking. "That sword is poison," I said. "We made it to be poison." It had been an intelligent, if somewhat brutal, decision. If you were going to put a weapon like that in someone's hands, you didn't want them to live long enough to turn it against you.

"Yes," Loki agreed. "But if you don't give it to him, he's going to die. Not a threat, by the way, just a statement of fact. He dug too deep, too fast, and there aren't many other weapons that could get him out of the hole he's in."

"If I do give it to him," I countered dryly, "he won't survive. Not as who he is now." In all its long history, nobody had *ever* carried Tyrfing for more than a handful of days without changing. And Winter was already a werewolf, already a blood mage, already carrying the weight of far more temptation than most people could bear up under.

"Surely that's better than death," Loki murmured. He was still smiling, but there was something wrong with it now, even beyond his typical scarred features. It wasn't a good smile.

I pictured what Winter might turn into, under the influence of that sword, and shook my head. "I'm not so sure," I said. "Sometimes dead is better."

"That's funny," Loki said, and now there was an edge to his voice, something sharp and bitter. "I remember you saying something much different, all those years ago. Something about how binding my son was the kindest thing you could do for him?"

I looked at Loki, but I wasn't seeing him. I was seeing a long-ago forge, with six impossibilities lying on the workbench. I was seeing the ribbon running through my fingers after it had been finished, soft and smooth but far too strong to be broken.

And I was seeing the pitiful, hopeless look on the wolf's face when they put the fetter on him.

Many would say that the fetter was a metaphor, a concrete representation of the abstract limits which had been put on Fenrir's power. They would be right, and also wrong. There's reality, and there's metaphor, and when you're dealing with gods there's also a certain grey area where the two concepts overlap.

"I was wrong," I said, pulling my attention back to the moment. "I was wrong to say it, I was wrong to make it, and I was wrong to stand by and let them use it. Are you happy now, Loki? I was *wrong*."

"No," he said. "No, happy definitely isn't the word for it."

"Then why," I asked sharply, "do you want me to do the same thing again?"

He seemed to consider it for a moment. "Would you believe me," he said at last, "if I told you that he'll be happier for it in the long run? It'll change him, yes, but not for the worse. Or at least not entirely."

"And why would you know better than I what will make him happy?"

Loki smiled again. "Because he's his father's son."

I stared at him for a moment, then slumped. "Yes," I said listlessly. "I suppose he is."

"Then you'll do it?"

I grunted and nodded, picking up the piece of gold again. Soon, I knew, I would have to go and fetch the blade from its resting place back in Svartalfheim—and *that* was a conversation I certainly wasn't looking forward to. In the meantime, though, I could finish this pointless little bauble. I could remind myself that I had made more than just evil swords and chains for gods.

Loki ceased to manifest himself after a few minutes of watching me work. The shadow stayed for several long moments. A reminder, that Loki could be watching at any time, and I might not have any way to tell.

As threats went, it was a good one. Subtle, yes, but...ominous.

I arranged to meet Winter at an old, largely abandoned garage. It was one of my secondary workshops, where I had done work that I didn't want associated with my business. Or rather, it had been one of my secondary workshops; I wasn't going to be coming back after this. I was planning to burn it down within a day or two, in fact.

I regretted that a little. I still had some of my kin's characteristic hoarding instinct, although I'd largely transferred it away from physical goods. Recognizing that skills and secrets were more valuable was one of the few real pieces of wisdom I'd won with age.

Winter showed up late and seemed suspicious about the whole thing, which was good. I'd have been worried if he trusted this arrangement. I hardly paid any attention to the conversation as I told him that I knew he was in a dangerous situation, and I had a weapon that might help. I avoided the topic of how I knew that, and I never said that I wanted him to take it. An oath to speak no lies can be

bothersome, but once you've learned to choose your words with care it proves less so than one might expect.

And then he took the sword. I watched as it began to sink its teeth into him, already making the connections that would hold it to him. They were still incomplete, more tasting than biting; Tyrting wouldn't truly establish a connection until it had been used to kill, and it wouldn't recognize ownership unless the death were an act of betrayal. A safety measure we had built into it, all those centuries before.

I wondered what it said about us, that we considered limiting its use to the ruthless and desperate a safety measure. At the time, it had made sense. We would prevent it from being used casually, ensure that its wielder truly *needed* the power. We would keep it from falling into the hands of the weak-willed, where it could cause serious harm.

In hindsight, there were probably better ways to approach the problem.

I stood outside, draped in a simple grey cloak, as Winter experimented with the sword and then walked out. He didn't notice me, as I'd expected. That cloak was woven through with magic, not so much invisibility as insignificance; he could see me, but his eyes slid from one side to the other without recognizing me as more than a background object. It was an old Sidhe approach that I'd learned to duplicate with the runic magic that I favored, and it was as effective now as it had always been.

I watched him go, carrying the sword with a gingerly manner that suggested he had some conception of how dangerous it was. That was good; for him to have recognized it so soon, and to be treating it with respect and a little fear rather than desire, those were good signs. They suggested that Loki was right, and the sword wouldn't dominate his personality.

I wondered, as he left, what it meant. What the consequences of my choice would be. Had I in some measure atoned for my sins, as Loki had claimed? Or had I compounded them?

I sighed and turned away. I supposed that I would find out eventually. In the meantime, there was work to be done.