

The Ship

"What is that?" Killian asked, a scowl on his face.

"Beer," Finn replied, setting the pint of pale green liquid in front of his friend. His lips twitched at the look of disgust on Killian's face. He took a sip from his own glass and smacked his lips. A burst of laughter came from the people at the bar.

"You're having me on."

"No, it's a real ale, I promise. Taste it."

Killian stretched out his arm slowly and grasped the glass. Reluctantly, he sniffed it before taking a tiny sip. His eyebrows rose, and he took two long swallows before setting the glass down. "Huh," he grunted.

Finn grinned, interpreting the noise as approval. He leant back against the settle and let his eyes wander around the familiar pub. Old photographs and paintings of various ships decorated the walls, along with a large ship's wheel. The low, dark beams overhead and the long, dark wood bar opposite the table they had commandeered gave the place a cosy feel. He closed his eyes, listening to the clink of glass and cutlery, the soft murmur of voices punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter. He sighed with pleasure as the

delicious aroma of lamb wafted over from the next table, contentment flowing over him at the normality of it all.

It was difficult to believe that none of them even belonged in this realm of Midgard, the realm he thought of as home. Finn had spent most of his life believing he was an orphan, like his two best friends. Instead, he was a sorcerer's son from Vanaheim, and his friends were elves behind the glamour that prevented people from seeing who they really were, one light and one dark.

"Still giving you pain?"

Finn glanced at Killian, who was watching him carefully. "What?"

His friend pointed to his hands. Finn looked down. He had been rubbing the numb skin on his palms.

"Oh, no," he said, reaching for his drink. "Between Dee's potions and the daemon's magic, they've healed really well. You can hardly see the scars."

"I suppose he has his uses."

High praise indeed, the daemon hissed indignantly. Finn smiled to himself. Only he knew the daemon imprisoned in Garridan's ring was none other than Suter, king of the fire giants and ruler of Muspelheim. And the rightful owner of the Charred Blade.

Killian took another mouthful of beer and glanced out the window. "What's taking her so long?"

"You know what she's like when she gets the baking bug."

"We need to make plans. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was avoiding the subject."

"I don't mind that if we're well-fed. Besides, you can't stay away from her cakes. It's a wonder you don't look like a ball the way you eat them."

Killian smirked and patted his stomach. "I have a perfect

metabolism. This body is a work of art."

"Like a Picasso, you mean?"

Killian scowled, making Finn laugh. "You think you're so funny. We'll see who's still laughing when we hit the pool tomorrow."

Finn shook his head with a smile. He knew Killian was all talk. Physically, Finn was in great shape. There were no outward signs of the injuries he had sustained on the long journey to Muspelheim and back.

His mind told a different story, however.

His smile faded.

Finn filled his waking hours with as much activity as possible and could go several hours without thinking about his ordeal. He spent his evenings playing mindless games on his console, which often continued until the early hours when his body rebelled enough to drive him reluctantly to his bed. Once asleep, however, his brain tormented him by remembering the very worst of the trials he had suffered.

He often had nightmares of being burnt alive, watching his hands melt away as the heat raced up his arms. Another dream found him wandering, lost and alone, in a suffocating white mist while spectral figures swam in his peripheral vision.

Or Suter standing before him, his nostrils flared, and his mouth twisted into a snarl. In his huge hands was the Charred Blade, tongues of fire licking the lethal edges as it slowly sank into Finn's chest.

He mentally shook himself. His friends didn't know about his nightmares, and he intended to keep it that way. They had enough to contend with without having to babysit him through the night.

Which brought him back to the reason they all needed to

talk. The next item on Garridan's list of artefacts.

"What is Mimir's Orb, anyway?" he murmured.

"No idea," Killian said with a shrug. "Does your invisible friend know?"

The daemon hissed angrily. *Command me to send the bothersome dwarf to the bottom of the ocean.*

Fin raised an eyebrow. "Can you do that?"

Possibly. Put me to the test.

Finn bit his lip when Killian glared at him. "What is he saying?"

"Do you know what the orb is?" Finn asked, ignoring Killian.

There was a brief pause. *I do not*, he said finally.

"Well?"

"He doesn't know."

"Thought not," Killian said, picking up his glass and drinking.

The daemon made a noise like an angry cat. *However, I can tell you that Mimir lives in the mountains of Jotunheim.*

"Where is Jotunheim?" Finn asked.

Killian swore and closed his eyes. "Oh, that's great," he said sarcastically. "Why don't you kill me now?"

"What's wrong? Is it a dangerous place?"

"You could say that."

Just then, a tall, pale woman with long white hair entered the bar and, after a cursory glance around, made her way to the corner table where Finn and Killian sat.

"What did you make this time, Dee?" Finn asked, standing to one side so she could squeeze past him.

She smiled. "All your favourites."

He rubbed his hands together. "Excellent. What can I get you?"

She looked at the two glasses on the table and raised an eyebrow. "Plain white wine for me, please."

Finn pulled out his wallet and made his way back to the bar. Although he had returned to his job as an architect, it wasn't technically necessary. Garridan had provided Dee and Killian with a large amount of gold to support themselves in Midgard, the realm he knew as Earth. They had shown him the bank statement when he had fretted about not being able to work, and the amount had shocked him. It was more than enough to support all three of them comfortably for the rest of their lives.

If it were up to him, they would stay in Midgard and finish their lives in ease, but his friends had sworn an oath. They were determined to find the remaining artefacts and deliver both them and him to his father.

Who was waiting for them in the realm of the dead.

He glanced back at the table and watched Dee take a sip of Killian's beer. Unfortunately, ignoring the sorcerer's last wishes wasn't an option. The blood oath they had sworn meant his friends would continue this crazy quest without him if necessary. And the daemon had told him they would both die if Finn didn't accompany them. Even with his help and the daemon's magic, they had barely escaped Muspelheim with the Charred Blade. His conscience wouldn't let him abandon them now.

"Yes, sir?"

Finn placed his order, and when the barman went to the wine fridge, Finn pulled a picture from the front pocket of his wallet and stared at it. It was a little ragged around the edges, but the photograph was one of Finn's favourites, and he carried it with him all the time. The three of them were standing outside the front door of their house on the day

they first moved in after leaving the Landford Home for Foundlings. Dee and Finn were smiling widely, their arms around each other's shoulders. In front was Killian, a black scowl on his face and his arms crossed. The image was a little skewed because Finn had knocked the camera slightly while setting the timer and running back to pose with them.

He sighed as he slipped the photo back into his wallet and paid for the large Pinot Grigio. Discovering that the people he counted as his dearest and closest friends were hired bodyguards had been a tremendous blow. The thought of losing them had never entered his mind before. Now, the only thing keeping them together was the oath they had sworn to Garridan, the father he had no memory of. As soon as they had finished their quest, his friends would likely go back to their own homes.

Mentally shoving the thought away, he picked up the wine and threaded his way back to their table. "Here you go," he said, putting the glass in front of Dee.

"Thanks." She picked it up and sipped it. They sat in silence for a moment.

"Finn says the orb is in Jotunheim," Killian said, putting his pint on the table with a thud.

If possible, Dee seemed to grow even paler. "Are you sure?"

Finn shrugged. "That's what the daemon says." He eyed his two friends. "What is Jotunheim?"

"The home of the frost giants," Killian said.

"Cold, then," Finn said, looking out the window at the spring flowers in planters across the street.

"It's a wilderness. No farmland, just mountains and forests where winter never loses its grip."

"We're going to Narnia?"

Killian rolled his eyes. "Nothing like it."

"No evil ice queen to defeat?"

"Only if you count Thrym's wife."

"And he is...?"

"King of the frost giants," Killian said.

"Great." Finn glanced over at Dee, who had stayed silent.

"So, how do we get there?"

"That's the tricky part," Killian said. "There is only one way to get to the realm of Jotunheim. We have to cross the River Ivinger. There are no other passages leading to it."

Finn shrugged. "Sounds simple enough. How wide is this river?" Finn asked.

"You can't swim across if that's what you're thinking."

Finn had always enjoyed swimming, but he had been going more regularly after his shoulder had recovered, testing himself in the pool against the clock, or doing a few more lengths each time. After his journey through Muspelheim, he had wanted to become fitter and stronger, knowing they still had three items left on Garridan's list. Swimming helped him recover the mobility in his shoulder, as well as providing an outlet for his unspoken feelings of inadequacy and fear.

Needing to challenge himself, he had even taken a couple of lessons in free diving, improving the length of time he could stay underwater without coming up for air. His best time was slightly over four minutes, but it was the peace that he enjoyed more than the challenge. There was something soothing about sitting at the bottom of the pool, watching arms and legs thrashing through the water above him.

"Can we row across?"

Killian snorted. "Odin created the river as a barrier to keep the frost giants contained. The river runs so fast it never freezes, and the currents are treacherous. He made it that

way so the jotnar can't cross it and attack Asgard. The only possibility is to navigate across the sea to the mouth of the Ivinger."

"Sea? Can we travel through Vanaheim?"

Killian shook his head. "Vanaheim has no sea. And before you ask, we can't get to it from here either."

"So, what you're saying is we need to go to another realm and find a ship."

"Not just any ship. One strong enough to traverse the Ivinger, and I have no idea where to get one." Killian drained his glass.

Finn sighed. Dee sat staring at the table, her own drink barely touched.

"Are you okay, Dee?" Finn asked gently.

She looked up, her eyes shining, and nodded.

"You don't look it."

"I'm fine."

Killian and Finn glanced at each other. If there was one thing they had learnt, the word 'fine' didn't mean all was well. In fact, it usually meant that something was definitely wrong.

"Spit it out," Finn said. "You know, keeping it to yourself only makes it worse."

She frowned. "I said, I'm fine."

"Fair enough," Finn said with a sigh. He waggled his glass at Killian. "Another?"

"Yes, but a proper pint this time."

"That was a proper one!"

Killian made a strangled noise, and Finn laughed. "Okay. I'll get another of the guest ales." As he rose, he widened his eyes and nodded his head towards Dee. Killian grimaced.

Finn took his time ordering, hoping that Killian could

winkle out what was wrong with Dee. Although the two of them bickered and argued constantly, Finn had witnessed too many instances of genuine affection and love between them to believe their antagonism was real. Despite that, neither of them seemed willing to acknowledge it.

When he returned, however, the silence was so thick he could have cut it with a knife. From Finn's point of view, that was worse than the arguments. He slid the glass of beer over to Killian.

"Dorset Nob," he said with a grin. He tilted his head slightly towards Dee and frowned. Killian shrugged. Finn rolled his eyes before sitting down and scooting closer to Dee.

"Hey," he said. "Please tell us what the problem is."

"I'm —"

"No, you're not. In fact, you've been quiet all week. What's going on?"

Dee opened her mouth and closed it again. She took a deep breath and let it out with a huff. "It's been nice being back home." She glanced at Killian, who had turned away. She lowered her eyes. "As soon as you got better, I knew it was only a matter of time before we left again."

"Yeah, I know," Finn said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "I think that was the reason I went back to work. I mean, we don't need the money, but it helped me feel normal again." He glanced down at the scar across her palm and frowned, wondering if he could ask her the reason for swearing a blood oath to Garridan. Until she'd fulfilled it, she would never be free. Neither of his friends had told him what had happened to make them do such a desperate thing.

"Well, it's all moot anyway," Killian said. "We can't get to Jotunheim. It's impossible."

"What about magic?" Finn asked. "Could you take us

there, daemon?"

I'm afraid that is beyond my ability.

Finn pursed his lips. "Then it's hopeless. We have no way to reach the orb."

"I know where we can find a ship." Dee whispered so quietly Finn had to lean further forward to hear her.

"You do? Well, that's great!" he said with a smile. "Where?"

"Alfheim," she said. "We'll have to go to Alfheim."

"Your home realm? That doesn't sound like a problem to me."

She turned and stared at him before suddenly getting up. Pushing past Finn, she went out the door, leaving Finn and Killian staring in confusion in her wake.

"What did I say wrong?" Finn asked, holding his hands up.

"Why are you asking me?" Killian grumbled. "I'm not a mind reader." He picked up his pint glass and took a swig before smacking his lips.

"I'd have thought she would have been pleased. I mean, she got all teary when we travelled close to the portal in Vanaheim." He sighed and picked up his drink. "Perhaps we should follow her."

"No," Killian said. "Leave her be."

"But she's obviously upset."

Killian shook his head. "Trust me. It's best to let her stew for a while. Go in too early, and she'll bite your head off. Of course, if you leave it too long, she'll eviscerate you."

"That's not very helpful."

"Put it this way," Killian said, eyeing his drink. "You have enough time to buy me another pint."

Preparations

After returning from the pub, Finn climbed the stairs in their small terrace house and found Dee curled up on her large four-poster bed, her back to the door, which was slightly ajar. On the floor was a battered rucksack that looked as if it had already been packed. He took a deep breath and knocked on the doorjamb softly before entering. The floral curtains wafted in the breeze from the window. Her room was light and airy with fresh flowers on her dresser adding to the scents of lavender and rosemary that he always associated with her. Her wallpaper and bedding were white, with pale blue accessories adding a soothing contrast.

Finn crossed to the bed. "What's going on, Dee?"

"I'm fine," she said, her eyes tightly closed.

He pushed aside the net and lace curtains and sat next to her on the bed, holding her hand. "I don't understand," he said. "You'll get to go home. I thought you'd be happy. Don't you miss it?"

"Of course I do. I think about it every day."

"Then talk to me. Why does the thought of returning there upset you?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I want to be left alone." She pulled her hand away.

Finn sighed and got up. "You know where to find me if you change your mind."

"All you need to know is that I left for a very good reason, and unless something has changed radically, the reason is still there."

"But you've been gone a long time," he pointed out. "You might be worrying over nothing."

"You don't know anything about it."

"Because you won't tell me. Perhaps if I knew more, I could help."

Dee turned onto her back and threw her arm across her face. "Finn, I know you mean well, but this isn't something that will magically go away. Some things can't be fixed."

He looked down at her. "Then just tell me one thing. Is it dangerous for you to go back?"

"No. At least, not in the way you mean."

"That's something." He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "If you need to talk..."

"I know."

He stared at her for a moment and opened his mouth to say more, but closed it again. Prying further would only anger her. Finn left the room, gently pulling the door closed behind him. Killian stood in the hallway, his face a mixture of anger and sorrow. He looked at Finn and back at Dee's door before turning and walking into his own room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Finn retreated to his bedroom and threw himself down on the bed. Relationships were so complicated. He wondered if he'd ever be able to figure them out.

It seems as if our respite has ended, the daemon hissed.

Finn closed his eyes with a small smile. Here was another relationship he couldn't quite grasp. "Looks like it. What about you? Do you need more time?"

No, Master, I am recovered.

Finn felt a pang of guilt. Each time he ordered the daemon to use his magic, it caused him pain. The more difficult the task, the greater the agony. The daemon had used much of his reserves to unlock a rift between the realms and enable Finn to return to Midgard with the Charred Blade.

Finn absently stroked the ring on his right thumb. "I must say, the thought of going on another treasure hunt isn't filling me with joy. According to my father, retrieving the sword was supposed to be the easiest task."

I am sure you will acquit yourself admirably and return triumphant.

"I'm flattered by your confidence in my abilities." His eyes wandered around the familiar room, filled with items collected over the years or gifted to him by his friends. He didn't feel ready to go on another journey. He would much rather stay at home. "At least Dee thinks she can get us a ship to sail across to Jotunheim, which is a big problem solved. I just wish I knew what was bugging her." The daemon remained silent, and Finn sat up. "You know why she's upset, don't you?"

The daemon didn't speak for several seconds. *I do*, he said eventually.

"So, what's the problem?"

If the alf does not want to tell you, I do not think I should override her wishes.

"Seriously? Just tell me."

Is that an order, Master?

"What? No, of course not."

It sounded very much like an order to me.

Finn cursed under his breath.

I'm sorry, Master. I didn't hear you properly. What did you say?

"You are not my slave," Finn said through gritted teeth.

Technically, I am until I win my freedom. You are my master now, and my magic is at your disposal.

"You know I don't want to use your magic."

Unless you have no other choice, the daemon reminded him.

Finn groaned as he recalled how often he had relied on the daemon's powers, despite vowing never to do so. "And I'm sorry, you know that. I don't want to hurt you."

The daemon chuckled. It sounded like steam erupting from a dozen hot-water pipes.

I am teasing you, Master. Serving you is a pleasure. You should utilise my power more. It would ease your travels and speed up your quests.

Finn thumped his pillow and lay back down on the bed. "I really don't understand you. Why do you keep pushing me to use magic, especially knowing that it will cause you pain? You should be pleased I'm not hurting you."

I appreciate your determination, the daemon sissed, *but I am ordered to aid you in every way. I cannot do so if you refuse my help. Merely command me —*

"Not happening," Finn interrupted.

There was a pause. *In that case, I choose not to enlighten you.*

Finn frowned. "About what?"

Why the elf does not relish returning to her home world, the daemon replied smugly.

Finn shook his head. "Great. Really great. Then, keep your secrets."

Of course, if you ordered me, I would have to comply, the daemon said.

"No. It doesn't matter. No doubt I'll find out soon enough."

He lay in silence for a few minutes before swinging his legs off the bed with a sigh and walking over to his wardrobe. Grabbing his backpack from the bottom, he pulled it out and opened it. He might as well gather the things he would need for the journey. "Will you at least tell me what to expect in Alfheim and Jotunheim so I can be properly prepared?"

As Finn pulled out clothes and stuffed them in the bag, the daemon described the climate of both realms.

Alfheim is temperate and constantly light. The temperature only fluctuates a little. Even the rain falls gently. You will not need much to be comfortable. Food and drink are plentiful.

"Sounds idyllic," he replied while sniffing a T-shirt. "What are the people like?"

The alfar are a proud race. They value beauty and perfection above all things and strive to excel in all art forms. Most of them rarely leave their cities, but when they do, they prefer to ride as much as possible. The faster the mount, the happier they are.

"I've never ridden anything except a bus," Finn said.

You will probably find it uncomfortable, although I could—

"What about Jotunheim?" he interrupted, stalling the daemon's suggestion. "Killian said it's cold."

Finn could imagine the daemon smiling as he continued. *Jotunheim's climate is the exact opposite of my home world. Freezing temperatures and constant sleet or snow. The days are short, and the terrain is largely inhospitable with dense forests and towering mountains.*

"Pack warm clothes," Finn muttered to himself as he opened a drawer in his dresser.

You will need to do a great deal of walking and climbing. I expect you will tire easily, especially after your last ordeal.

"I know what you're doing," Finn said as he pulled out his thermal underwear. "It won't work. You forget I know what

I'm capable of. I climbed the Brittle Stairs, remember? Besides, I've been building up my muscles and stamina in the pool and the gym. Navigating a mountain will be a piece of cake."

If you say so, Master.

"Why does that not fill me with confidence?"

I cannot say, Master.

Finn hesitated before stuffing the underwear into the bag with a shrug. He had belatedly learnt that items changed after passing through to another realm. He couldn't take Midgard's technology through, for instance. His clothing had also changed to suit the world he travelled to. The underwear might become something else, but it was worth the risk if it gave him an added layer of warmth.

He sat back on his bed, dropping the backpack at his feet. "Why won't you call me Finn? I hate it when you call me master. It reminds me that you're trapped in this ring and there's nothing I can do about it."

One of Garridan's first commands was that I address the wearer of the ring as master at all times.

Finn frowned as he tried to align his scant memories of a gentle, loving father with the single-minded, almost ruthless sorcerer everyone spoke of. He struggled to marry them up in his mind, having no extra information to draw upon. There was so much of his memory missing, years of knowledge that were forever lost to him.

"What if I countermanded his order? Would you call me by my name then?"

Interesting, the daemon purred. Two conflicting commands. I might explode trying to process such a dilemma. I suppose there is only one way to find out.

"Tempting," Finn muttered.

The daemon sighed. *What if I told you I was bored?*

Finn laughed. "You're incorrigible. I have to give you ten out of ten for perseverance."

The past few weeks have been... tedious.

"What? Why? I haven't made any demands on your time."

Exactly. What do you think I do when you are not conversing with me?

"I don't know." He shifted slightly. "Sleep?"

I do not sleep. I do not eat. I am in a limbo of existence. The only entertainment I have is speaking to you or eavesdropping on the conversations and actions around you. I exist in bland ennui. At least when I perform magic, it relieves the monotony for a short while. The pain may be difficult to bear, but it reminds me I am alive.

"I didn't realise." Finn scratched his head as he tried to imagine what it would be like to live in a virtual vacuum, with nothing to occupy his mind. "I thought I was helping you heal by not disturbing you. I assumed you were resting, like I was."

Does that mean you have a task for me?

"Nice try, but no. I will make sure I talk to you more, though."

Then I shall have to be patient. I am sure you will have need of my services after you cross into Alfheim.

"Not if I can help it."

The daemon chuckled.

Finn lay back on his bed, his hands under his head. From the little he had learnt from Dee and the information from the daemon, he imagined Alfheim was a beautiful, heavenly place of light and laughter. He very much doubted that he would need to call on the daemon's powers whilst travelling in such a perfect realm.

Betwixt

"Where are we going?" Finn asked as Dee turned in the opposite direction to the stone bridge. He had assumed they would use the crossing leading to Vanaheim before travelling to the portal he knew existed in that realm.

"Alfheim," Killian said, hitching his backpack higher on his shoulder.

"But the way to Vanaheim is that way," he said, pointing over his shoulder.

"There are many ways into Alfheim, if you know how. That's why there are so many tales about fairy folk."

Finn was disappointed. He had been looking forward to seeing Dunker again, the troll who guarded the way into Vanaheim. The first time he had encountered the troll, he had been reeling from the shocking revelation that not only did he not belong in Midgard, but he also had a father. The information had overwhelmed him, and he hadn't really taken it all in. His memory of Dunker was sketchy, and he had been looking forward to examining him more closely.

Dee stopped at the bus stop and looked at the timetable. "The ten forty to Lyndhurst is due. We'll take that one."

"The New Forest? So close?" Finn asked.

"The alf love woods. The older they are, the more likely they are to have a doorway. This forest is very old. It existed long before William the Conqueror laid claim to it as his hunting grounds."

Finn frowned. "So, where is the doorway?"

"A place called Mogshade Hill. There is a reason why high places are seen as sacred. The ancients knew of the openings, even sought them out, desperate to enter our realm."

"I had no idea. Did anyone ever succeed?" Finn said.

"Of course. You must have heard tales of men slipping into the world of the fae, never to be seen again. Most of them end up falling in love with the fairy queen and staying in the realm for years, thinking only days have gone past."

Finn nodded. "I've heard those stories. The queen must be very beautiful to enthrall so many."

"She is," Dee said, a faraway look on her face.

After boarding the bus, Finn settled back in his seat and watched the world go by. His attempts at conversation were met with short answers, or in Killian's case, grunts, so he gave up. The weather was balmy, and the trees were sprouting leaves as the spring weather finally warmed up. Bluebells and daffodils lined the hedgerows and woodland on either side of the road, their colours a welcome sight after the long, grey winter days.

When they disembarked at Lyndhurst, Dee led the way. She walked swiftly past the rows of shops and cafes on the high street and out the other side of the village, turning right when they came to the road leading to Emery Down. Finn trailed behind, watching the people around him buying souvenirs, chatting over drinks, and enjoying the sunshine. His heart twisted as they passed a family; the youngest child

on her father's shoulders and her sibling talking animatedly about the ponies they had seen. He had never known that closeness, or at least, he had no memory of it. Instead, he had been spirited away, separated from his father, and left with his two companions.

He mentally chastised himself as he turned his head away and hurried to catch up with Dee and Killian. There was no point in wishing for something that would never happen or mourning for things lost. His father may have sent him away, but he must have had an excellent reason to do something so extreme. Finn hadn't been left to fend for himself, either. He had his friends, a home, and a good life provided for him with a large amount of gold. He needed to keep that at the forefront of his mind.

They passed another pub, bustling with customers taking advantage of the weather to meet up with friends and sit outside. Finn felt a prickle of envy at their carefree laughter and outwardly ordinary lives, while he was, once again, travelling to the unknown on a mad quest for some kind of orb. He briefly wondered what magical properties it held that could possibly aid his father's escape from Helheim.

Eventually, they left the winding road and headed into the forest itself on muddy tracks dotted with puddles from the recent rain. The hum of cars ceased altogether, and all he heard was the soft sighing of the breeze and birds chirping in the trees. As the afternoon wore on, they followed a wide path, which rose steadily until they were climbing a fairly steep hill.

Not far from the top, Dee moved off the path and through the trees into a small clearing. Finn looked around for a bridge or a cave, but there was nothing.

"Where are we exactly?"

"Mogshade Hill. The shadow of trees." She pulled several items from her rucksack.

Finn looked around at the trees ringing the clearing, their branches stretching overhead. "And the entrance is...?"

"Hidden," she said shortly. She looked up at the sky. "We have plenty of time."

Finn watched as she placed two pieces of wood on the ground with a gap between them. Next, she pulled out two paper cups and half-filled them with water before putting them beside the wood. Finally, she dug two small holes and placed white candles in them, carefully replacing the soil until they stood firmly upright.

"What happens now?"

"We wait," Dee said. She went over to a tree and sat down beside it. Killian dropped his backpack and followed suit.

"What are we waiting for?"

"The betwixt time." She closed her eyes.

Finn wanted to know more, but it was clear she was still in no mood for talking. Instead, he stomped to the other side of the clearing, away from both of them. He wrenched his backpack off and slumped against a tree. "I hate it when they do that," he grumbled quietly to himself. "I thought after all we've been through, they would treat me as an equal. They don't tell me anything."

I imagine neither of them is happy to be going to Alfheim.

Finn frowned. "Why not?"

The alf has her reasons, but the svartalf will not be welcomed. In fact, his presence may likely be met with hostility. There is great enmity between the two races of alfar.

"Will they hurt him?" Finn asked softly, glancing over at his friend.

Who can say? You, however, need not worry. They welcome the

Vanir as friends and allies.

Finn bit his lip. Killian had never once hinted that it might be dangerous for him to enter Alfheim. He had merely gone along with the plans Dee had made. Looking back, Finn realised he should have known something wasn't right. The two of them hardly ever agreed on anything, but there had been no arguments since leaving the pub.

He felt uneasy. Perhaps this visit to Dee's home world wouldn't be as smooth as he'd imagined. He looked down at his hand. The ring on his right thumb shone occasionally as the sun broke through the gently blowing leaves, as if inviting him to use its power. Would he stand by helplessly while the alfar beat or imprisoned Killian? He knew the answer without hesitating. Of course not. He would utilise the daemon's power to protect his friend, despite his determination not to.

"Why do the elves hate each other so much?"

Once the two races were close, their mutual jealousy of the Aesir and their desire for power binding them together. That was until the light elves made a secret alliance with the Vanir, one which granted them more power than their cousins. The Svartalfar were furious, feeling betrayed by those they counted as allies against the vanity of the gods. Pride and stubbornness dissolved all ties between the two races, and they swore to have nothing to do with each other from that day.

The Svartalfar were disadvantaged by the accord, and suddenly at the mercy of their former kin, but their arrogance and envy would not allow them to approach the Aesir.

"That's the name for Odin and the other gods, isn't it?"

It is. They would never demean themselves by seeking his aid. Instead, they came to me.

"To make an alliance?"

Yes. We shared our knowledge of hammer and fire, teaching them the words of forging and the songs of the anvil. They delved deeper into their subterranean home, finding precious gems and stones of magic, enabling them to create powerful weapons and magnificent artefacts, protection against the Vanir's sorcery.

As time passed, their skills became legendary, and their artisans renowned throughout the nine realms, so much so that the Aesir gods greatly desired Svartalfheim's riches for themselves. Mjolnir, Thor's hammer, Brisingamen, Freyja's golden necklace, and Gungnir, Odin's spear, were all made by the dark elves. In turn, the Aesir bestowed their favour on the Svartalfs, fanning the flames of resentment and jealousy even more between the alfar.

"So, what did you get in return?"

The daemon chuckled. *Gems. We have no such things in Muspelheim, but we knew their value and greatly desired them. The dark elves have an almost unlimited supply.*

"Did your alliance make them even again?"

No. The seeds of mistrust, jealousy, and fear have only widened the gulf between the two races. Now relations are as far apart as they once were close. The svartalf risks much by entering their realm.

"That explains a lot," Finn said, regretting his petulance. He thought back to the beginning of their friendship, wondering once more what could have possessed Dee and Killian to swear such binding oaths to Garridan, especially if they knew they would be thrown together with a sworn enemy. The hatred between the two would have been very real at first, but their relationship had softened during the intervening years. Their arguments were more of a habit than any real animosity.

If they could learn to respect, even love each other, surely others could follow their example?

A rustling in the trees above jerked Finn from his reverie.

A large black bird had settled on the branch of a silver birch and was preening its feathers. He stared at it for a moment. Perhaps it was simply a coincidence, but he had seen a few birds like it since discovering the truth about himself. Unless it was the same one. He shook his head. It was ridiculous to consider it could have followed him all the way to Muspelheim.

The sky grew darker as evening drew in. Suddenly, something changed in the atmosphere, and Finn felt the hairs on his neck rise. He shifted slightly, glancing around the clearing. He felt as if he were being watched, but could see nothing untoward. A shiver ran down his spine. Apart from the rustling of his clothes as he twisted, he could hear nothing else. All the sounds of leaves rustling in the breeze and insects buzzing in the undergrowth had stopped. His mouth went dry as all colour in the clearing seemed to leach away.

Dee quickly got to her feet and walked into the centre of the clearing. "It's time," she said.

Finn rose hurriedly and put on his rucksack. He rubbed his arms as the hairs rose on them and joined her. "How does this work?"

"We are entering the betwixt times, the space between day and night, light and shadow, east and west, land and water. Only then will the barrier between our two worlds stretch thin enough for us to slip through. Stay close. The window of opportunity is small." She bent and lit the two candles. Finn watched as the flames danced in the slight breeze.

"Are you okay?" Finn asked Killian as he stood next to him. His friend merely grunted. Finn wanted to comfort him, to tell him he was on his side, but hesitated. The dwarf was fiercely independent and would likely take offence if Finn implied he was incapable of handling himself.

"Now," Dee said, striding between the candles. Finn blinked once, and she disappeared. He stood with his mouth open.

Killian pushed him in the back. "Move, boy," he said impatiently.

Finn lunged forward and felt himself slide through a narrow opening into a brilliant light.