



Frigga (Valentines Sweethearts)

Author: *Carrie Weston*

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Description: Frigga's heart belonged to the museum's curator, Sam, from the moment their eyes meet. But Frigga's past wars with her ability to see through her traumas and allow her to love again. Will their forced proximity whilst finishing the Norse exhibit relent her fears or will there be too much of a gap to bridge?

Join Frigga and Sam for a valentine's romance like no other

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Fresh from uni and brimming with optimism, I moved into the small, old-fashioned town of Etenam a few weeks ago . My late aunt had offered any of her relatives the chance to stay in her home after her passing, as long as the ground rent was paid. I seized the opportunity, hoping to carve my own path in this quaint little town.

“ A house for waifs and strays ,” my Aunt would say when I was young. I couldn’t help but snort, remembering how my aunt had bestowed the title of waif on my ex-boyfriend, Tye, not barely a year ago. I shrugged, conceding to the wisdom of her preconceived knowledge. It had been but a few days before he had begun making my life a living nightmare with his controlling tendencies. I regret defending him to her that day almost as much as I regret ever dating the devil.

He’d started out nice, so kind and well mannered. A prince for the childish princess inside my mind. I never really had to grow up. Coming from a wealthy family, my every wish and dream were attainable. I never had to want for anything and when Tye had come along, suspected now of making me his mark, life had been perfect. He had taken care of everything, my parents loved him, everybody did, but they didn’t know him. Not like I did. Sighing, I let the tension recede from my body and the muscles that tensed whenever I thought back to those dreadful days with him.

I leaned down, clutching my steaming coffee on the glass table sandwiched between the television set and the one and only paisley sofa my aunt had ever owned. I blew at the steam circulating the top as, thanks to the warm mug, my fingers finally thawed. It was late winter and already the early morning frost was eating away at the warm cloud produced by the central heating. I couldn’t help the shiver that ran through my every cell like a noxious poison in my veins as the thought of the heating bill entered my mind. I took another sip, the bitter sweet lava chasing the worry from my mind as

I swiped the newspaper off the table and flipped it open to the employment page.

The title captions were overstated in a bid to cover the gaping space where a few columns advertised. I scanned the articles, but they merely instructed unemployed persons to create CVs online for businesses to troll through. A total waste of time if you ask me. How am I supposed to stand out from thousands of other designers more inept than I am and even those I graduated with. I couldn't. My family's position and wealth could make me visible in that graduating pile of applicants. But there was no way, after all this time pushing forward on my own merits, that I was going to parade my family's name just to get a job. I could do it on my own. I was a capable, modern day, independent woman and I could most definitely attain a job.

I looked through a few adverts. Dustbin people required? No, but their salary was definitely alluring. Part time baker? Ha! I could cook one thing and one thing only since I left home and that was noodles. I chuckled to myself.

There were no clients seeking an interior designer for an extravagantly priced mansion without budget constraints that would limit my creativity. The realization that my only options were waitressing or a supermarket job chilled me to the bone. I couldn't help the shiver that resonated through me. My life was so unfair. I tried so hard to stand on my own feet, away from the clutches of my parents and their insistence on choosing me a betrothed no doubt to further the reach of expansion within the family business and yet I never seemed to catch a break.

Taking a deep breath, I turned the page with a crisp snap, my eyes rolling over dog walking positions and nannies until there, right at the bottom in the smallest of advertisements, was the opportunity I was looking for.

Etenham museum seeks remodelling for the newest Norse Mythology exhibition opening this summer. We are looking for friendly local talent to work with Norse historian, Sam Wotan, to help bring tourists to our quiet little town this summer. For

more information, or to apply, please call the museum directly.

My teeth clenched with excitement at the thought of applying for the museum job. All the years I'd spent studying at university could finally pay off

I was a designer, for heaven's sake. A creator of fantasies within homes and grand spaces. I could match any colour suitably to fashionable items. Even a second glance, fueled by fervent hope for a suitable position, yielded nothing.

I chewed my lip instinctively as I mulled over the details. Could the museum hold an opportunity hiding in plain sight? Maybe it could lead to something big, I thought. There was no denying it had potential, but was it really for me? Thinking about it, with ground rent due next week, I had no choice but to dial the number and pray luck was on my side.

Pulling my mobile from my pocket, I flipped it open barely glancing at the family Christmas photo my overbearing bossy parents insisted upon every year. This year, my homecoming for festivities resulted in yet more pessimistic lectures.

"A well-off young lady pulling away from the family business to study in an entirely different industry," my father had scoffed. And making it on her own in a poorer relative's part bought, part rented little house was laughable to my mother.

I always felt like the punchline inside a Christmas cracker. My parents always anticipated my downfall. I was so sure they might have revelled in my misfortune, the joke, before they donned their paper crowns and dominated my life before drawing me back into our close-knit family's clutches.

I used to imagine them choosing me a husband. Not for love's sake, but for the amplification of their business expansions and, of course, money. Sighing, I shook away the terror that felt like fingers crawling down my spine. Relinquishing the

nightmare from my mind, I decided to take a chance and dial the museum's number.

"Etenham Museum, how can I help you?" a tinkling voice answered. I took a deep, calming breath.

"Good afternoon, my name is Frigga Smith. I am enquiring about the exhibition design vacancy in the paper." I drummed my fingers while I waited.

"Hmmm. Oh yes, I had almost forgotten. Mr Wallace is conducting interviews tomorrow. You're lucky you called today, one day later, and boom, job gone."

I could feel the hairs on my nape stand in irritation at the woman's overzealous, sunny disposition.

"And what time is the interview?" I prompted.

"Hmm, let's see," the shuffling of paper permeated down the line, "As his last candidate, he can fit you in at...half past 2...Ish."

"Excellent, thank you," I hung up, mumbling obscenities at the woman. I could see it now, when we met tomorrow the dippy woman would wear wild clothes infused with flower power or love vibes. I was certain of it. I shook my head, chuckling to myself. By the next morning, my humour faded as I met with a replica of my expectation.

"Good afternoon, sweetie." I looked at the bobbing daisy clock on her desk. "You must be Frigga." She held her hand out and I took it in a firm shake. "Oh, strong girl," she chuckled. "Take a seat in the cafeteria, Mr Wallace will be with you soon." She smiled, ferreting around behind her desk before stopping me in my tracks and calling out, "Oh, and if you could read this." She handed me a sheet of paper.

Entering the cafeteria, just shy of seeing the whole reception desk, I pulled out a

metal chair and sat. A loud groan rent from the chair, its attention causing a blush to bloom across my cheeks. I fiddled with my Hello Kitty scrunchie bracelet to calm my erratic heart. The memory of the day my brother bought it smiled back at me. I took a deep breath and began to read.

Hello and welcome,

We at the Etenhan Museum are dedicated historians, working relentlessly to bring an authentic encounter with Norse mythology to the public. We want sights, smells, and sounds. Think BIG! Think OUT OF THE BOX!

If, however, you are new to Norse mythology, our local curator and historian specialist Sam Wotan will be on hand throughout the process.

What we want from you is a VISION.

If you still feel capable of providing that after reading this, fantastic. If not, no hard feelings - feel free to depart. Please notify reception on your way out.

I raised a delicate eyebrow, waiting. In my peripheral vision, I watched another candidate slip away through a light blue door behind a man I suspected to be Mr Wallace. The clock ticked interminably. It jumped on its mount every minute. As the clock ticked down, I couldn't help the sigh that bubbled up inside of me. I had to get this job, I just had to. I wrung my fingers together before tugging at the scrunchie band. I could do this, I knew I could. But the last candidate that had gone, still hadn't returned and spending forty-five minutes on an interview exceeded the time of the last three by 10 minutes. I had no chance. I knew it. I tugged at my scrunchie, whispering a mantra of pleases beneath my breath.

Finally, the door opened and out walked the stilettoed blond huffing. "So unprofessional," she muttered as she passed. "These small town jobs want miracles

for pittance,” she continued, her steps receding with her rant as she exited the building.

The man behind her differed from the initial interviewer. He stood there, hands in his jean pockets, shoulders a little hunched, with a slightly shy smile spreading his thin lips. “Miss Smith?” I found myself jumping to attention, the chair screeching with my exuberance, earning a chuckle from the irritating, tinkling voice of the receptionist. I tried hard not to glare at the woman as I passed, hurrying over to the caramel skinned man, my tongue sweeping my plump bottom lip with the delectable taste of caramel invoked in my mind.

“Take a seat. My name is Sam Wotan. I regret the late interviewer change. Mr. Wallace needed to leave.

“Oh, dear. I, uh, hope he’s okay.” I remarked, surveying the office, my eyes curiously roaming over the roman suit of armour standing proudly behind the desk.

“Yes, yes, just a migraine. He succumbs to them more often these days.” He smiled kindly, a twinkle emphasising his overly large doe eyes. “I’m sure you’re not interested in hearing about any of this. You are here for the Norse display remodelling.” His smile was sweet but stern. He sat, back straight, behind a large desk. “First the formalities. I need your passport, ID, and references.” He waited expectantly.

I could feel my nerves fizzing, sparking like electrical wires as I ferreted through my bag and pulled out my phone placing it on the desk, then my card wallet and lipstick and coffee sashes and finally my passport and documents folded neatly into the last section of the bag. Cheeks glowing red, I handed them over, restuffing my bag as neatly and as fast as possible as I prayed my fiery cheeks, extinguished.

“Brilliant, thank you. So tell me why you want this job, Miss Smith.” The smooth

tone of his voice sent shivers down my spine.

“Honestly? I need to pay the rent.” I looked him in his doe brown eyes, finding understanding.

“Well, that’s always an excellent incentive,” he chuckled.

“I mean, I want it to showcase my interior design skills.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Hmm, so you are coming at it from that angle? Okay, I can see you are more than qualified, if inexperienced, in that sector of the project.” He moved the papers aside and folded his fingers on the table, leaning closer, his eyes ablaze. “But what about the mythology side? Do you know anything about Norse mythology?”

“Honestly, no.” I watched him sit back in his seat, disappointment evident in the deep furrow of his brow.

“Alright then miss --- how do you expect to go about creating the exhibit with no knowledge of the subject?” I could feel my cheeks flush at his stark judgement.

My ire was well and truly sparked. I sat straight, my eyes blazing. “Mr. Wotan I am more than capable of using Google, researching in a library and of course asking your own fine opinion on such historical implements.” He chuckled, making my back straighten in offence.

“I’m sure you are and as for my FINE opinion - it’s yours whenever you need it.” His smile was soft, genuine, like a door opening from the cold outside, melting the stiffness in my spine. A slight blush battled my pallor.

“I assume you have some idea of what you’re looking for other than what is stated in the newspaper, Mr Wotan.”

“Yes, of course. We have a thousand square feet of floor space to create. It is not huge, so I need the exhibit to be interactive around one major theme that can house all the artifacts I have collected on the Norse beliefs.”

“What kind of artifacts do you have?” His grin widened.

“Come with me.” He led me back through the blue door and into a small storage room. I couldn’t help but feel my skin prickle with the enormity of the realisation that I really did want this job. I could do so much. Already, ideas were forming in my mind’s eye. Colour palettes nagged at my subconscious, and then, a coarse smell, with its eye-watering grimness, snapped me back to the present from my meanderings. Mr Wotan chuckled.

“Stored artifacts can sometimes get a little musty, and this beauty has been flown in from Denmark so it’s a little on the stank side. Don’t worry, by the time I’ve cleaned her up and polished her, she won’t smell at all.” He stared at it with all the adoration of a mother with a newborn and I couldn’t help the flutter in my heart as a grin spread across my face.

“What is it?” I asked, staring into the crate.

“This is the legendary hammer of Thor, god of thunder. It’s called Mjolnir. People recreated it using texts back in the back as far as the 11 th century. Although not an actual artifact of the era, it is old enough to be considered an artifact in its own right. Vikings would worship Thor through idols of his hammer.” His eyes sparkled as he spoke but it was his lips I couldn’t stop staring at as they pouted at the end of certain words.

“Strange.” My comment was aloft and fleeting, sure, but I couldn’t get my vocal chords to work as my heart leapt into my throat, desperate to escape and affix itself to the delectable Mr Wotan.

“Thor was a part of their everyday lives. He was the god who kept Midgard safe. His hammer could equally bless or punish.” I watched his eyes twinkle and my breath hitched. For a man so well formed and matured, that was a little naughty, I thought.

“You sound like a comic book geek,” I chuckled, chewing my lip and remembering how my brother had loved comics. I quickly pushed the memory aside before it could swamp me.

“Harsh. Comics are fiction. Everything I am telling you is fact.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Alright, put into context, I can envision a true or false peg board or flip wheel about Thor and his hammer.”

“Wonderful. But in what colours? What images?” He leaned closer, his musky scent filling the air.

“Well, I would suggest incorporating the super hero theme into it as it will keep the children’s interest and help them learn, so maybe red and silver.” He grinned again, sliding the wooden top back onto the crate and sliding it across from a medieval breastplate before leading me out of the storage room.

“Well, Miss Smith, thank you for coming.” He held out his hand, its surface rough but his shake firm as I slipped my soft palm into his. “I’ll be in touch when a decision has been made. I mean, Mr Wallace will.” He chuckled, swiping a hand through his thick coal dark hair. The soft fragrance of tea tree hit me like the scent of mothers yoga room at home.

“Thank you, Mr Wotan.” I turned to leave, unsure how the interview would play out. I decided to treat myself to chicken noodles instead of the usual university food I was still stuck eating thanks to the determination to stand on my own feet.

I glanced back when he called out, “Miss Smith, I hope we meet again.” He smiled, a slight glow dancing on his cheeks. I raised an eyebrow, my smile a second too late.

“M..me too.” I turned, my steps quickening. Did he just? Absolutely not, he was much older than me; he was simply being kind. Besides, it's not like we had anything in common, though he did smell good. And... that smile.

The sounds of light town traffic imbued an array of friendly honks unlike the city horns I used to hear, honking their bad attitudes and spreading them like a plague of anger consuming everyone within reach. The softer sounds of the early Tudor chocolate-box town were much more to my liking than the frustration and stress I associated with the city. I loved almost everything about it, from the cobbled streets and black beamed houses to the ash tree in the park children had tied rope swings to. All except for the transport. Now that was another matter, vehicles in the city were easily accessible but in the small town of Etenham, buses came once every hour and Ubers charged a fortune.

I couldn't help the sigh that escaped me as I sat on the tiny metal seat in the bus shelter, reading the posters plastered to its walls in haste no doubt from the peeling top corner.

An over obnoxious picture of a vibrantly dressed dame from the pantomime adorned the visage. I couldn't help but chuckle at her over pronounced ruby lips. I had always wanted to experience such a show but my mother looked down on them and as her too obedient daughter I did as I was told back then. I took a quick snap of the poster. If I had enough money left over this month after all the bills I might even go.

The bus came rolling in, shunting to a halt before me. Standing up off the cold bus stop seat, I pulled out my purse and ascended the steps. Into the less bitter quiet cold. Tapping my card, I found a seat on one of the less sustained upholsteries. I wished my mother could see me now. She would have a fit. My father had grown the

business from scratch. My mother had always been from a wealthy family, so the image of me sitting on a bus would probably scar her fragile brain. Although I loved my mother very much, she was most definitely a snob. I, on the other hand, was more like my father. Though even now mother had converted him to her ways. Neither of them would have me or my siblings seen on public transport.

I had the urge to take a photo and send it to them. Naughty, I told myself. I would never send it. Even if I had taken it. For it would only bring them down on my head. I wanted to make a life of my own. Where I was not at the mercy of my family's fortune. Nor was I the boss's daughter. I wanted to rely on my own qualifications and intelligence. I wanted to be, just me.

The bus jolted forwards, a heavy thrumming rent the air as the engine ticked over, luring me into a strange sleep. It wasn't until I smelt the stench of oil from some sort of engineer sitting next to me, that I stirred awake. The late afternoon sun was setting in a horizon of purplish ombre against the deeply bruised sky peppered with gleaming stars, each one trying to outshine the other. Their smell of damp earth permeated through the bus and a shiver raked my spine. I looked up just as we pulled into my stop. I shuffled around, grabbing my bag and checking my phone was still securely in my pocket. Why I insisted on having it shoved in my pocket I didn't know, I just felt safer with it there in case my handbag was snatched. I stood as the bus jolted to a stop and navigated the narrow the walkway littered with the bags of the working class traveling home. I nodded goodbye to the driver, an old man with a bald head who travelled the same route day in and day out, oh how bored he must be. Yet he still spared the time to smile and wink back at me as I exited the bus.

The ten minute walk back to my apartment was quiet. Though it was filled with the soft sounds of the bray of horses and awakening barn owls from the farm not a few miles away. Strange how sound carried when everything seemed so still. The soft glow of the lamp shone on the sidewalk. I used to look at the sidewalk and see mottled colours and roughness. Now? Barely a splat of bird faeces adorned them. I

smiled to myself. I liked this town. If I got this job I could stay. I felt my heart flutter at the thought and realised how much I actually wanted it.

Thinking back to my interview had me fantasising again of Sam and his beautiful caramel skin, his warm aura, and his deep-set smoky quartz eyes. He was too old for me by far. But that dashing smile of his? Sigh . It had my stomach all in KNOTS. He seemed to like me too, not that it mattered. I have written off attractions to men since my ex. There was no way I was going against that. Not for a young man, let alone a man twice my age. Not that age mattered. Or did it? Now that I'd thought about it I didn't think it would. But... there had to be a but somewhere, right? I frowned a little trying to think. I shook my head, dislodging the thought. There was no need to stress. I probably wouldn't even get offered the job. There were loads of applicants and I was sure at least one of them was more versed in Norse mythology than me. I supposed there always would be in a small town. I found myself looking up to the stars and wishing like a child. Could this job, this little chance, be mine?

That night when I got in, I put the kettle on and queued the toaster. Pulling a pack of noodles from the cupboard, I thought about how they were my go-to meal since uni. Of course, it was because I was always busy, they were cheap, and to top it off my ex hated it when I put on even the slightest bit of weight. My stomach churned at the thought of him. It was chillier than I expected, so I turned up the heating and put on my hoodie. I made a scalding hot cup of coffee, soaked my noodles and buttered my toast, looking around at my aunt's apartment. It wasn't much, but for me? It was a chance at a new beginning and a life free from dictation. That was enough for me. I smiled to myself as I sipped my coffee. I grabbed the hot bowl, blowing gently at the steam that bellowed from their carballyousness as I twisted my fork into their depths.

Just as I was about to chow down in front of an old rerun of the Bold and the Beautiful, the mellow voice of Micheal Buble rang out. I picked up my phone, answering.

“Mum?”

“Hello, darling. How are you? It has been too long.” Came her soft yet dominant voice down the phone.

“Mother, I saw you at Christmas,” I moaned, remembering the headache that was.

“Exactly. That was ages ago.” I could hear the snark of frustration in her voice as she spoke to me.

“Mom, really? It was like five minutes ago.” I groaned, feeling the always present anaconda squeeze the freedom out of my life.

“Still too long. Your father’s wondering when you are coming back.”

Sure, I thought to myself. More like she was. “I have just returned from an interview mum,” I groan, exhaustion lacing each word.

“An interior design job? Oh, how wonderful, darling. Congratulations. Assuming you got it. You did get it, didn’t you? If not, I or Daddy can always have a word. I am sure knowing who you are will be of benefit,” she chirped happily.

“Mum please, I don’t want that. I told you. I want to do this on my own.” The anaconda squeezing the life from me just tightened its grip at the mention of the ‘family name’.

“Yes, yes, of course, darling. I’m aware. I respect that decision. I really do. But when the time arrives that you do need our help. You will call, won’t you?” She gave me her ‘no nonsense or I will hound you every day with phone calls’ voice.

I sigh. “Yes, mother.” I had found that it was often beneficial to just agree with her.

“Mom, I have to go and eat my noodles. I mean dinner. It is getting cold.” I looked down into my bowl, my stomach grumbling as if on cue.

“Noodles again. I do worry about your health, darling. You eat so many of those stupid things. Don’t you realise their carbs?” she snapped, her all controlling tendencies apparent through the phone line.

“Yes, mother. Now I really have to go. I will talk to you soon.” I rolled my eyes, happy to get a reprieve from the nagging she had been giving me everyday since I left the family business and went to university.

“Okay, darling, if you insist. I love you. Bye.”

She hung up before I could say goodbye. As usual. I put the phone down, grabbed my fork, and dug into my noodles.

My evening wasn’t that eventful After that, I fell asleep on the sofa and woke only to my alarm. I turned over and slapped it off. I had no need of it really. I had no job. Though I really should get up. Maybe I had an email or a voice message from the museum. If I did, all my prayers would be fulfilled. If I didn’t, my problems were only just beginning.

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The next day, I woke to the warm hug of my snood knotted tightly around my lean body, The TV blaring, and an empty bowl of noodles balanced on my lap, the starchy smell musty in the air. I grabbed the bowl, placing it safely on the table before it could tip over. Stretching, I went about my usual routine before turning the kettle on, its low rumble like the presence of a calming purr as I waited as patiently as a decaffeinated person can. I fished my phone from my pocket, checking my messages and scrolling over the junk mail that seemed to evade my filters.

There, hiding at the back, was the email I had been waiting for. I clicked it open, my heart racing at one thousand miles a minute. I crossed my fingers like a child. This was it. My finger hovered over the touchscreen. Click .

Dear Miss Frigga Smith,

We are happy to invite you into our folds here at the museum. We look forward to working with you. Sam has assured me your interview was very productive and I look forward to meeting you on Monday.

Yes, yes, yes! I wanted to scream, but ended up doing a happy dance between the sofa and table in the form of the world's worst wiggle. I was definitely not cut out to be a dancer of any kind, no matter how many ballet lessons I had been marched to as a child. In the productions I was always the elephant whilst the other girls leapt around like delicate swans. I unwedged myself and put on the coffee. Sipping it, I could not help the smile that spread across my face. I am free from my parents. At least for a little longer. I will make this job work. I have to.

Butterflies flapped around in my stomach as I grabbed another coffee and headed to

the wardrobe in the small single bedroom covered in pinkish rose wallpaper. It smelled like old must and cigarettes which was why I mostly slept on the sofa. My aunt had been a chain smoker for a long time and the yellowed marks on the wallpaper and ceiling could attest to that. Opening the window by the safety latch, I chewed my lip in thought. Since leaving home for university, I haven't needed a suit, but I always kept one in my wardrobe just in case. Especially where my parents were concerned. You never knew when they would drop a family occasion on you or one of my siblings hosted a charity event. Shaking the mothballs from the stiff grey cotton pant suit, I smiled. I had really done it and now I would show everyone how well I could do on my own. Hanging it up to dishevel the creases of time, I headed into the shower, washing. I changed into sweats, one article of clothing my mother could not abide, before grabbing my laptop and getting a head start on the whole Norse mythology theme. It wasn't like I had much background on it so it was a blessing I had the weekend to prepare. But unfortunately the weekend went faster than I could have imagined. I was studying up on all the Gods and their purposes in the Norse religion, but I also had a stonking headache. Before work tomorrow, I had to get rid of this. I thought it was an early night for me. I packed my laptop and stylus away, set my phone to charge, made sure I turned the alarm on and had a thermos flask ready for my morning coffee. Then I slumped into bed, covers pulled tight, a silly panda eye mask pulled over my eyes to soothe them as I slept amidst a splay of overstuffed plushies and pillows. Although I considered moving away from my family's riches, the comfort of a luxurious bed was a luxury I couldn't let go of, regardless of my age. I twisted my hair up into the hello kitty scrunchie my brother had gifted me years ago and sighed as I felt my body melt into a relaxing puddle in the bed. I heard my soft snores before I felt my body drift into weightless sleep.

Beep Beep Beep!

The alarm woke me, my hand swooping out from under my fluffy cloud of pillows to smack it off. I groaned and stretched out fully. Hearing my muscles pop with satisfaction, I crawled from the nest of my bed. Pulling off my scrunchie and securely

fastening it to my wrist where it settled like a sixties bracelet.

Whether it went with the stone grey pant suit or not, the scrunchie was staying. It gave me courage. I could feel it as I combed my mid-length hair, leaving it down... for now. Too nervous to eat, I grabbed my thermos, filling it and slung my bags on my shoulder, my purse reachable and ready for the bus ride. I left home, forgetting my Mac as I hurried to the bus stop, the butterflies in my stomach burning the nearer I got to the museum, until I was finally there, not a five minute walk from the entrance.

The building stood intimidatingly. It had a huge glass window, and I watched the footman as I clicked closer to the wide entrance in my heels.

You can do this. You got this. I pulled at the scrunchie, letting it snap back into my wrist. We got this. I stepped inside, the musty smell of old, stony artifacts tickling my nose.

‘Frigga sweetie!’ It was the sunshine woman at the desk who greeted me as I quickly sipped an ‘oh my God give me strength’ sized gulp of coffee.

“Good morning, Mrs Anton”

“Oh Jessy... it’s Jessy, sweetie. No formalities here, we are all family.” She grinned. “Well, not literally, but you know what I mean. Don’t you?” As she babbled, her frizzy red hair bobbed.

“Of course.”

“Oh good. Here I was thinking I put my foot in it again and you thought we were all...”

“Can you tell Mr Wallace I’m here? Please?” I couldn’t help my abruptness.

“Oh sure.” She swung on her wheel chair. “Let me just.. and... yes there he is. Oh yes. Hello sir. Why no, I mean yes, she’s right here and I... Oh, yes of course, I’ll send her in. W...where are you again? The Blue Room? Okay, Sir, yes sir. Cheerio.” Putting the phone down, she giggled. “He is such a naughty old man, charming the likes of me like that when he knows I don’t like it.” She blushed peruse and I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. It sure looked like she enjoyed it to me.

Sweeping my hazel hair from my soft toned face, I pulled my stylus and laptop from my bag, switched it on, the bright light glaring blindingly in the afternoon ambiance of the museum cafeteria, and began sketching up a floor plan with the use of the interior measurements Mr Wallace had sent me.

The job was not the one of my dreams, but by God I would do my best to make it the best it could be. If that meant I spent every waking moment slaving over the sketches then that was what I would do and by the end of it I would have a spectacular piece for my portfolio. Yes, that was the plan. I paused, sticking the stylus over my ear before reaching for my now lukewarm coffee. I cringed inwardly as the eggshell blue mugs chip scratched my lips, a bead of blood blooming from its inappropriate kiss.

Hissing, I put the cup down, searching my pockets for a tissue to dab at my swelling lip. Just my luck , I thought as I pulled out a receipt for the bus, a penny, and a bent paper clip. With a deep sigh, I scooted my chair back to stand but before I could a caramel hand presented a white cotton handkerchief before me, its edges neatly folded.

“Here, you have a little something...” I looked up to see Mr Wotan stroke the bottom of his lip, his doe eyes gentle as he gave an encouraging brief nod. Feeling my cheeks heat at the hesitation, I quickly swept up the handkerchief and pressed it firmly to my lips, staving off the flowering crimson.

“Uh, thank you.” I pulled the stylus back from behind my ear and started sketching single handedly, the cotton pressed to my lip. But burying my head in my sketches seemed to have the unaverred effect of drawing Mr Wotan’s attention more deeply as he leaned over me to point at the screen.

“Hmm. Is that where you're thinking of putting Odin's sword?” I turned to look up at him, the space between us a mere three prickling inches. A sharp nod said what I couldn’t. I hated men getting this close. Ever since my ex forced his intentions upon me, the mere sight of men this close to me sent shivers down my spine. “Are you cold?”

“Huh? N...no.”

“Hmmm. Maybe a hot cup of coffee? Yours looks barely drinkable.” Chewing the inside of my cheek, I conceded.

“Fine. Thank you.” I tried desperately to concentrate on my sketch as Mr Wotan placed a steaming cup of coffee next to me and pulled out a chair. Sitting, he reached over, turning the screen. Instantly, my back stiffened. I grabbed a sip of my coffee to cover it but the slight tilt of his lip betrayed his notice.

“Okay, talk me through this.” He pointed to the museum entrance.

“Well, I was thinking of starting with some facts like the ‘did you know’ style bubbles you slide to reveal answers.”

“Hmm, like, did you know the famous tale of the three billy goats gruff started out from the Norse fairy tale of the bad tempered beast?” I blinked, never taking my eyes off of him as he practically became one with the design I had sketched.

“Yes, interactive slides of the mischievous Loki and facts brought through to the

Marvel characters we see now.” He tilted his head, sliding his large rimmed spectacles up his sharp nose to frame his almond doe eyes. “You did your research.”

“Of course,” I snapped, slightly offended he would think me inept when it came to job preparation, but then I supposed that was what many people prejudged recent graduates of. He leaned in closer and I fought not to back away as his knee gently nudged mine sending shockwaves of warning through my system at the same time as stirring something foreign within the depths of my soul, something restless and fluttering.

“But do you know the tale of Frigg and her beloved son?” He grinned. I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not completely unaware of the origins of my name, Mr Wotan.”

“Oh? Do tell.” He leaned closer. “And call me Sam.”

“I.. I...” Sliding my chair back, I stood suddenly. “I was a December baby and they said they couldn’t think of a name until one day they spotted mistletoe. They kissed beneath it and wanted to remember the special day so they named me after the goddess who created the mistletoe in remembrance of her son.”

“It figures. But your parents must have been very into Norse mythology or Vikings. Maybe they were even...”

“They are deep in the belly of this country's business network. Wealthy beyond dreams and, yes, I'm sure my father wanted to relay that power and wealth by affording all of my siblings and I status even within our names. I've broken from them. This is to be my new start, a chance at life without their guided intentions.” I wrapped my arms around myself. “Sometimes within wealthy families their daughters and sons are used as commodities to further enhance the family's status and

that was me with my ex who turned out to be... awful. So, from now on, I will make my own decisions and show them I don't need their approval to be happy." Sam arched towards me, his gentle fingers stroking my forearm softly.

"I'm sorry. That must have been hard on you. I respect your decision, it is a bold and noble one."

"I assume they named me after a goddess on purpose. I suppose I prefer to think that it was purposeful that they viewed me as their 'little goddess'." I shrugged, my turtle-neck sweater sliding up to cozy my ears and hide my mouth like a child left out in the cold.

"I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable. It was not my intention. I was just... curious." He sat up straighter, rubbing a caramel hand through his fine obsidian hair. "Maybe I should go." Stuck in my own traumatic dissociation, I remained silent, a single tear slipping from my eye. Not a year had passed since I felt on top of the world, fulfilled and happy but now...

Sam braced his hands on the table, readying to stand before changing his mind and placing his hand on mine. "You know I like to think that my parents are in the halls of Valhalla right now, feasting and drinking with the warriors, looking down on me, watching over me, pride glittering in their eyes." He smiled softly.

I turned watery blue eyes as deep as the bottomless ocean to the warmth of his earthy brown ones like a moth to the flame. I was drawn back from my disposition, back from the deep trauma of my past to the comforting kindness in his almond shaped eyes and the easy smile on his thin lips. I smiled in return, for once grateful that someone had stayed with me instead of abandoning me in my flashbacks of the past like so many of those people who could not possibly understand did.

"Are you feeling a little better?" His smooth soft voice wrapped me in a comfort

blanket I didn't know I needed.

"Yes. Thank you. It happens sometimes when I disassociate and end up stuck in a void of my past."

"I imagine that can be hard. I wasn't sure at first. Thought that maybe you just needed to be left alone, but then your eyes..."

"My eyes?"

"They reminded me of how my sister would glaze over when she had one of her fits as a child. She would seem almost blind to the world."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, she's fine. She was content living in Cornwall. The fresh sea air is supposed to help that kind of thing."

"Cornwall? Wow. I hear it's pretty down there." He nodded.

"It is. You should go sometime." My eyes darted to his, a small blush creeping along my cheeks as the intensity of his gaze burned into mine.

"Sometime," I barely whispered, earning a wide grin that showcased his double dimples, making my internal feminine side sigh with appreciation.

At the sound of clinking dishes, we both looked to the canteen desk where staff stood busily wrapping and packing bits away.

"I guess they are closing," he muttered. I sighed, shutting my laptop, and placing both it and the stylus carefully in my bag. "Can I walk you to your car?"

“Oh, I don’t drive,” I chuckled in embarrassment. I never really had to when I was younger. I always had a driver take me wherever I wanted.

“Oh, do you live close, then?” he probed

“Oh no, I caught the bus here. I live on the outskirts.” He raised an eyebrow at that.

“Can I drive you home?” he asked, shuffling on the spot. I slid my silky hair from the little cat scrunchie and placed it on my wrist.

“Alright. Thank you,” I conceded, a ride in a car would be much faster and smoother than the bus and I was already desperate to get out of my suit and into my fluffy cozies with a steaming mug of chamomile tea. I sighed.

“Come on, you look tired.” I noticed his fingers twitching before he pulled the car keys from his pocket. Smiling softly, I got up, tucked my chair in and packed away my laptop. The main lights of the museum shut off when we exited and the night guard bid us a peaceful evening, with a conspiratorial wink aimed in Sam's direction. He shook his head gently in reprimand. “Its open.” He slipped into the old sedan and started the engine. As the engine purred to life, I shivered. Suddenly, the heater thrummed to life and I inwardly grinned, appreciating the attention he paid to my comfort.

As the car pulled off, my heart gave a little skip. I had done it. I was finally putting my masters in design to use and loving it. Even if it was only at the town’s local museum.

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Sam took the drive slowly, encouraging me to open up as he asked frivolous questions.

“Do you want the radio on?”

“No, I’m fine.” I smiled. Sam relaxed a little. At least I was comfortable enough in his presence to not have to drown out the entire drive with radio gabble or more irritating tapping on my phone, pretending to be distracted by something important.

“So, have you lived in Etenham long?” I caught his glance before he turned right at the junction.

“Since I moved out of university digs and into a flat over on tenth street.”

“Do you like it?” I glanced at him, at his sleek black hair, his deep brown eyes and his rather large nose. Why was he curious? Why did he care and for that matter why had I accepted a ride home with him? It was not like I knew him well enough really.

“I mean, it’s small and quiet, so it’s really different from the hustle and bustle of the city and a lot more relaxing than the everyday chaos of university life, but so far, yes.”

“It's cold at the moment, but when it’s warmer there is the most stunning display of roses in the park by the river. Have you ever seen them?” I raised an eyebrow. Huh, he liked roses? I hadn’t pegged him as an outdoorsy type of man but maybe I was wrong.

“No, when I first moved into town, I was too busy applying for jobs every second of the day to waste time on luxuries,” I chuckled dryly. “Besides, I doubt winter's bite would have the same enchantment on their beauty.”

“Beauty can be found anywhere and taking time out and enjoying life is not a luxury, it is a god given right. You deserve that.” He must have noted my slight flinch and guilt at his harsh tone. “I mean, a young woman like yourself deserves to be happy.” I blushed, catching a glimpse of a matching glow on his cheeks from the corner of my eye.

The silence was crushing as he pulled up to my flat, desperately searching for something to break the tension. “Well,”

“Thanks for the ride.” I stepped out, shutting the door.

“Wait, I’ll walk you to the door.”

“It’s fine.” I smiled kindly, walking to the door and giving a brief nod before entering. Finally home, I slumped against the closed door, sighing. Was he really flirting with me, or am I imagining things? I had been too nervous to look at him directly and see if he also felt the tingling pull of a new attraction. I shook the thought from my mind. He was much older than me. There was no way he would hit on me. He was probably just babying me, taking me under his wing or some such.

I pressed a palm against my aching forehead. It was all too much. A new job, an enormous responsibility, and a crush? No, I couldn't have found it all in one small little town more focused on Vikings and mythology than living in the 21st century. Well, that was what you got, I supposed, when you moved into a touristy town no bigger than a sea front village.

Humming to myself, I clicked on the kettle, dropped my bag on the side, and pulled

an enchilada out of the freezer, plonking it into the microwave, beginning my usual routine of dressing in snuggly lounge wear and having dinner alone in front of the television, streaming a Bold and Beautiful rerun. But tonight felt different. Tonight, for the first time since I arrived in the little town of Etenham, I felt... lonely.

My heart seemed to beat lethargically without the presence of Sam, yet at his very thought entering my mind it picked up like a loyal pet awaiting its master's return. A deep sigh resonated from my very soul and saw me sink into a deep and peaceful sleep.

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Waking to the persistent chirp of my mobile, I switched off my alarm, rubbing the stiffness from my neck and blinked, “Happy Valentines!” blared an extremely loved up actor on the TV. I couldn’t help but sigh. I usually tried to skip over holidays like Valentines and the fact that it was growing near had my heart trying desperately to bury itself from pain. I hated it. I couldn’t stand the pretentious heart and chocolates, the fake flowers and insincere declarations. The whole day and its lead up were a nightmare. I sighed, clicking the remote to view the date.

February 10th.

Four days until doomsday , I thought. At least I had the stability of a job this year instead of hiding out in my dorm room with my friends all acting like love sick idiots. A deep sigh escaped me as I readied for work. I left the house with a coffee in one hand, a bag slung over my back, and a tired demeanour on my pale face.

A loud honking drew me from my thoughts. As I turned towards the bus stop, I noticed Sam’s car at the curb. I walked over a frown dancing on my face as with every step closer to him my feet felt lighter, my heart felt fuller, and my every cell tingled.

Sam rolled down the window. “Morning Frigga, care for a lift?” I shrugged, but got in. The money I would save on bus fare meant I could afford a croissant at work and I did love the buttery confection. I smiled, belted in, and sipped my coffee.

“Thanks. Do you live around here, then?” I asked, catching a slight twitch of his lips as I took another sip, peering over the top of the flask at him. He paused for a moment, his lips twitching.

“Not far.” He drove smoothly, swerving through the traffic with the grace of a dove in flight. The aroma of bitter coffee beans mixed with the honeysuckle sweetness of my perfume filled his car and I caught him taking a deep long sniff before sighing. “So, how did you sleep?” I gave him a calculating glare as it bore into him before I decided to respond.

“Not so much.”

“Oh, any reason I can help with? A problem at work, maybe?”

“No, no, there’s no problem with the exhibit. Don’t worry, the initial sketches are coming along fine. I should even have them finished by the end of the week along with the swatches and recommended materials to help bring the piece alive.” I took another sip as he indicated left and drove down a long street, the peppered houses becoming thick centuries either side of the bussing road. Slurp ! The sudden noise had my cheeks reddening. He chuckled, the sound smooth and soothing like a well matured wine. I felt my blush grow and I quickly continued. “You know, this town is rather quaint. These little black and white houses look like dolls should live in them, not people.” He chuckled, but I couldn’t tell if it was still from my slurping or from my perception of the small town. I blushed a little deeper, his baritone chuckle sending goosebumps over my flesh.

“We call it a chocolate box town because of all the old houses and their wooden beams. It takes you back in time.” He grinned. “It’s the perfect place for a historian to wind up.”

“So you have a forever job, then?” I asked, looking aside my lashes to gauge his reaction.

“You could say that,” he chuckled, dimples forming in his high formed cheeks. I hadn't really noticed them before on account of his soul-stirring eyes as brown as

mother earth's richest soil.

I pulled up a plan of the room space. "Here on the floor, we will paint a rainbow signifying the bridge between realms, then I'll add in several false walls. These will make up the branches of the Yggdrasil (the Norse world tree). From there, I suggest information plaques with voice overs, a little to do or fun fact puzzle for children and a few artifacts in central glass cases so they can be viewed from every angle. We could start the people off in Midgard (the Norse human realm) and work all the way up to Asgard (the Norse realm of the gods). You can show off that beautiful replica of Thors' hammer in the dwarf section because that is truly amazing. Maybe have a photo opportunity with a Thor actor? That'll bring in a lot of customers. Then maybe to fulfil the sensory aspect of what you desire, we could have the canteen offer little cupcakes with Thor's hammer icing on it and maybe mead for the adults if they wanted? I don't know," I shrugged. "It's only an idea but..."

"I love it." His eyes bugged. "It's perfect. I can see what you're doing and it sounds perfect. God's Frigga, I am so excited for this." He grabbed my hands, smiling radically wide and earning a blushing chuckle from me. "Frigga, you truly are a goddess."

"Don't let the gods hear you say that," I chuckled, "besides, my parents wouldn't agree."

"I'm sure they would." I laughed dryly at that.

"You don't know my family." If you did you wouldn't think that, I thought. "You would be running away screaming for help if you were smart, they are like a bunch of vultures ready to pick at the carcasses of the next boardroom kill."

"No, but from what you told me of them, I know they love you." I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“I know they do. But you don’t understand they’re so controlling. They want everything perfect, even me.” I catch my breath in a tearless sob.

“Because they love you and worry about you.”

“They’re suffocating-”

“Because they want you to make the right decisions?”

“They frustrate me!” I screech and his composure relaxes as he chuckles.

“Because you love them, too. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t care about their opinion on anything.”

“Aahhhgg!” I threw my hands up in the air.

“You could be my goddess anytime, Frigga.” My face glowed with every cell vibrating and tinting in order to gain his full attention.

“You’re not hitting on me, are you?” I couldn’t help it, the question just slipped out. He was so much older and so much more experienced. Why would he be hitting on me? I denounced my parents’ wealth so he wouldn’t gain anything there and besides, I’d sworn off men since my ex-boyfriend and now somehow that decision seemed mere childish prattle.

“Be happy you still have them in your life . Cherish every moment no matter how well it goes.” He stared deeply into my eyes, I was drowning in their stormy depths.

“You should meet them some day then you will see what I mean. You must be more of a fool than I thought. My father will never allow you at his table, knowing your interest in me.”

“And why is that?”

“You’re...” I blushed.

“Older, wiser, more experienced?”

“All of them. Father won’t see you as a suitable partner,” I replied bluntly, only noting my slip when it was already out.

“Partner? I never professed to be such but now I know we share that as a mutual interest I shall have to find even ground with your father, won’t I?” A blush the size of the river Gjoll soaked my cheeks.

“I... uh... I,” he chuckled, offering one grained hand out to me as we exited. “Join me for dinner.” His offer was clear, but the fire of love burned in his eyes, and I was irresistibly drawn to it.

“No, no, I shouldn’t.”

“Please, call it a working dinner if you must, but do come.” I looked into his eyes. They felt like a blanket of warmth enveloping my very soul, but...

“I can’t, I...”

The scent of his cologne filled my brain like a fog of entrapment. As of then, in a mirage, my ex stood before me. My chest constricted. I gasped for air, my head spinning as I fainted.

“Frigga, Frigga?” A cool hand touched my forehead. “You have a fever. You’ve been working too hard.” I blink up into his kind eyes. I wished I could take that leap even though the age gap was something my parents would not agree with. The more time I

spent around this man, the more comfortable and accepted I felt. It was strange yet marvellous and my heart fluttered every time we spoke. Goosebumps prickled my skin where he held me cradled to his chest. “Frigga?”

“Mmm.”

“Thank the gods. You fainted. I’m going to take you home then I’m calling the doctor.”

“I’ll be fine.” I mumbled as I listened to his heart thunder in his chest. I felt him seat me and place the belt across. Heard the click of it and the slam of the door. A soft hand squeezed mine as the engine roared to life, but I didn’t have the strength to squeeze it back.

“Frigga? Sweetheart? That’s it. I’m taking you to the walk-in clinic in the city. Just hold in there, okay.” I felt him check my pulse. Heard him call the clinic, explaining what had happened. But I had no energy to move. None to even keep my eyes open as I drifted in and out of sleep on a cloud of his musky scent, amid clips of sterile cleaners and snap shots of Sam and a nurse. Questions were asked I’m sure but my replies were mumbled. “Shh, shh, I got you.” A warm hand swept stray strands from my head settling my exhaustion as I fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

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“Mmm,” I rolled over, blinking. The surrounding room was dully lit. I blinked again. I did not recognise the décor, it seemed out of place, too masculine. Like a shot of adrenaline to the heart I sat up, eyes wide, where was I?

A form in the chair next to me sat forward. “Shh, shh it’s okay, Frigga. I brought you here because the doctor said you should not be alone. Do you remember? You agreed to stay here while you got better. The doctor sent some antibiotics and said you should rest.”

“W...what?”

A firm yet gentle hand pushed me back into the softness of a bed. I frowned. “This? I’m at your house?” I turned scarlet at his deep chuckle.

“That is what I said, Frigga, just relax. You’re safe, I promise and in the morning when you’re feeling better, you can go home. Or not,” he whispered, swiping his obsidian hair back.

My head spun with lights and shrill sounds like a strangled cat on a battlefield. I couldn’t fight him, not now. So, I conceded, closing my eyes, laying my trust in a man I hardly knew, once again, and praying, this time, my senses didn’t serve me wrong.

I slept restlessly, tossing and turning, sweat soaking my body. I could feel it wiped from my brow but when I ordered my eyes to open they refused and I sunk deeper into sleep.

A man stood before me, his hair long and raven shimmered in the moonlight. He turned slowly towards me, his caramel skin the perfect setting for his strong nose and deep set doe eyes. "Sam?" As soon as I said his name his almond eyes started to morph, his face shook like a salt shaker giving way to sea blue eyes, a short stumpy nose and pale skin. Tye!

I shook in my sleep, desperate to escape the nightmare until a firm but gentle hand gripped mine squeezing intermittently. "Shhh, it's alright you're safe. I'm here." The words were a foggy mist weaving through my nightmare, dispersing the image of Tye and wrapping me in a blanket of safety. Finally I could relax.

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I woke to the early morning chorus of birds chirping away without a care in the world. How peaceful it seemed here in the half-light. Not a single thought of work or stress ran through my mind as I stared upon Sam's peacefully resting form in the chair pulled close to the bedside. A small grin spread across my face. Maybe my instincts had been right for once, I thought as I let my eyes indulge in his masculine beauty. His eyelids twitched restlessly. He had the onset of crow's feet stretching his eyes. Kind eyes, I thought as they blinked open, the mist of dreams clearing from them.

I smiled as he wiped a hand over his face. "You're awake. How are you feeling?" I looked into his hand, taking the offered tablet.

"Thank you for looking after me. I'm feeling better, just a little lightheaded." I smiled softly, my stomach growling and betraying me, bringing a blush to my cheeks. He chuckled lightly.

"It seems I've neglected to feed you. You must be hungry. You have battled this fever for two nights now, waking only long enough for medicines and water. I bet you're starving."

I couldn't help the deepening blush on my cheeks as he stood before me, a fairy tale knight in shining armour to my damsel in distress.

"Oh eww," I remark. I was still in my pant suit. He blushed and turned away.

"There's a shower through that door if you want to freshen up. I'll find you something to wear."

“Mm, thank you.” My head twirled like a newly spun top, and I struggled to sit still. I gave him my best placating smile before he could ask how I felt and watched him leave the eclectic room. I wobbled, my very bones ached, my pallor was pale and skin clammy as I looked at my reflection in the wardrobe mirror and stumbled to the bathroom on jelly legs.

Washing seemed to take forever, the sweat thick on my blanched skin. I really overdid it. I hope Mr Wallace was not too upset that I didn’t make it into work today. Wait, Sam said I was out two days that meant today was Monday. Oh God, I had so much to do . I spun around, a sudden injection of adrenaline pumping through my veins as I snatched up the oversized jumper and pulled the belt as tight as it would go on the jeans Sam had left me. I couldn’t look in the mirror as I crossed the room. I was bound to look like some vagabond or child playing dress up in their daddy’s clothes and I didn’t need that embarrassment on top of my make-up being non-existent and knowing he had nursed me the last few nights.

“You look cute.” He grinned, sending a deep blush pulsing like a beacon through my cheeks. I could feel the butterflies in my stomach launch into flight, drawn to the light of his soul like I was.

You don’t need it right now. He took my arm, his touch burning an imprint of his kindness I would never forget. A touch like my parents had given me when I was a child, one of promise. The steady fondness of protection and lo...

I flinch, pulling away, my eyes widening. I’m unprepared for this. I’m not, I thought, my inner turmoil freezing me on the spot.

“It’s all right. Your laptop is over there and I have already called Mr Wallace and explained you are unwell. It’s all sorted, you do not need to worry, just rest.” He stepped tentatively closer like a farmer herding a frightened sheep.

“I...”

“It’s alright. Let me help you back to bed. I’ve brought you some soup and bread. The doctor said you should take it easy for a few days.” I stumbled to the bed on my own. My heart felt like a wrung out sponge at the sight of pain etched on his face as he retracted his offered hand.

He knelt, pulling my hands into his as I looked down into his doe brown eyes. His caramel skin looked pale as he smiled sadly, the twinkle I so lo- admired, missing from his beautiful eyes. “It’s all right, Frigga. You don’t need to be afraid, this connection we have... It doesn’t have to be anything more than two colleagues who are good friends.”

I slipped my hands free. “Don’t get me wrong I - I like you it’s just...”

He sighed deeply. “You’re too young for me. I understand. I’m not pushing anything. I just want to be there for you. I just wanted to help.” He stood. “I’ll let you eat in peace and bring the car around. I’ll take you home when you’re done.” He nodded slightly and left the room with a bitter click of the door sliding into place.

The butterflies in my stomach fell dead, eaten by the acid inside. My soul seemed to dim at the same time as the adrenaline in my veins abated.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to the closed door, a single tear falling from my eye. Why can’t I just be a normal woman? Why can’t I just accept his attention? It’s not like he cared if it went further or not he just wanted to help me, to be close to me, to lo- No no! That is not possible, if I let anyone love me again I’ll lose all control of my life. I can’t live like that. I can’t live with another HIM!

Knock .

The door slid open. "Are you ready? Frigga, you have not touched your soup," he scolded, softening his voice at my wince.

"I'm not hungry," I sniff.

"You are, come on. Let me help you." He held the spoon to my mouth. "Trust me."

"That's the hard part."

He grinned sadly.

"You can do it if you really try. I won't let you down. Now, eat. Then I'll take you home where you can be more comfortable, okay?" I nod.

"Thank you, Sam." I grip his hand. "For being so understanding - so kind."

"We all have our scars, Frigga. Some are more visible than others. It's what makes us unique. Strong." I nod but I still can't get my head around it. I finished the soup with his help, supping the liquid off the spoon, our eyes connecting for milliseconds at a time that seemed to span more than the length of the Sahara after my admission of wanting to go home.

Grabbing my laptop and meds, he bundled me into his car, his hands soft but firm as he belted me in against my protests at my capability. Without a word, he drove me home, his usual light demeanour dark and thunderous as the space between us seemed to stretch beyond comparable distance.

I could feel an itch under my skin. One that fed only to the emptiness my soul seemed to admit without the jovialities of Sam's voice chuntering in my ears about Norse this and Norse that. "Sam, please speak to me," I sniff a little emotionally from my ordeal.

“I, uh, I don’t really feel in the mood for light-hearted conversation right now,” he droned.

“Because of me,” I whispered

He glanced at me with a tight nod of his head. I touched his knee.

“I didn't mean to offend you, I just...”

“It’s fine.” He nuzzled my hand away. After a quick ride, we pulled up to my building. He got out and opened the door, helping me to my feet.

“I’ll see you in.” I didn’t argue as in one arm he took my things and in the other he helped me to my aunt’s flat. I fished around for the key and opened the door. “Thank you.”

“You’re sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” I monotone my soul feeling broken.

“I’ll check in on you after work.”

“No, there’s no need.” I smile reassuringly, but the colour of his eyes just seems to dim.

“As you wish. Look after yourself, Frigga.”

“You too,” I call as he shuts the door behind himself and I fumble to turn the lock before collapsing onto the sofa, exhausted.

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By Wednesday, I was feeling much better. I dressed, ready for work, grabbed my laptop and thermos of coffee and headed out, half expecting Sam to honk his horn and offer me a ride,- but I reached the bus stop without distraction. A deep sigh permeated from my very soul. Guilt nearly drowned me on my way to work, the thought of how, from his perspective, I must have seemed cruel and ungrateful. Hell, it seemed like it from my viewpoint too. What had I been thinking? Could I blame the fever? No, that wasn't true. It was all my doing, me and my scaredy-cat ways, past ruining any chance of happiness in my future. I got off the bus and walked in through the museum entrance.

“Hello dear,” the receptionist called. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“We were all so worried, especially Sam. Bless him, I’ve never seen him panic so much over a woman.” She winked spiritually. A slight blush pinkened my cheeks.

“Jessy, I would like to show Mr Wallace the design I have in mind. I spent all night finishing it.”

She gave me a hard stare. “You should have been resting.”

“Yes, but my job means the word to me. Please, is he in?”

“Yes, yes, dear, go ahead. He’s in the blue room.”

I hurried ahead, desperate to get approvals for my ideas, but as I turned the handle the

door swung open and I came face to face with Sam. I stared, stunned, my heart felt like it was beating again. The butterflies in my stomach raised their wings and just as I was about to offer a good morning he slipped past, no eye contact, no brush of skin, just a resigned slouch that had my brows furrowing in confusion as I watched him slink away into the shadows of the museum.

“Sir?” I looked to Mr Wallace.

“Come in, come in, sit down.” He waved me in, a sad but kind smile on his face.

“Sam’s acting so strange,” I comment freely as I prepare my laptop designs for his inspection.

“Yes, they’ve assigned him to night shifts until the new exhibit is complete.” He chewed his lip, his thick white moustache bobbing. “Can I ask you what happened, Frigga? Sam is usually such a cheerful man, so positive and since you fell sick he has become distant, illusive. He asked for night shifts, suggesting that it would make you feel more comfortable. Did something happen? I promise you if he’s hurt you, I will be on your side no matter how long he’s worked for me. I won’t allow bullying or... other things.”

“No, no, sir. Please don’t get the wrong idea. Sam has been a complete gentleman. I just might have been a little insensitive to our age difference when he...”

“Ahh. The guy has had a spark in his eyes since he met you. I’m guessing he asked you out? He doesn’t handle rejection well, never has, not since his last girlfriend of five years dumped him via a text message. Pretty cruel, if you ask me.”

“Uh, yeah. I'd never do that. Not that we are dating, cause we’re not.” A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of Sam morphing into my ex. “No, no, we’re just friends.”

“Hmm. We shall see. But for now, show me the plan, I've been waiting.”

“Yes sir, sorry about getting sick I...”

He put a hand up to stop me. “Don’t worry, Sam cleared it all. You're not in any trouble.” On one hand, his assurances made my mind clearer, my job feeling secure. But on the other, a deep and restless guilt spread like a stain upon my soul as I thought of how Sam must be feeling. No doubt he felt like his Norse god of the underworld right now, skulking around in the shadows far from the light of the rainbow bridge to Asgard. Sigh .

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Mr Wallace had liked the plans very much and so the next morning he sent me to procure the furniture or order it how I wished - a job that meant Sam would have no choice but to talk to me and because of his shift change I would have to stay late and pray the night bus was as safe as the day.

I spent most of the day searching online for furniture that other museums weren't using, embracing my mother's "waste not" philosophy. My thoughts drifted back to the nervous wreck I felt myself becoming at the thought of talking with Sam tonight. I couldn't believe it had come to this. What had I said wrong really? I took a sip of coffee, watching from a corner table in the canteen as tourists holding hands, walking close, and whispering sweet nothings passed through the museum doors. There were few children this time of year as school was in full swing, but the holidays would come around soon enough.

I sigh, lowering my empty cup. What am I supposed to say? I can't do this. My eyes flicked to the clock. I should just finish this job and move. Yeah, that would do it. But that would just prove my family right, That I couldn't cope by myself, that I needed to be coddled and steered into the family business. No, I couldn't do that either. Sigh . I had to face him. I had no choice. But did he really want to see me? I doubted it, seeing as he'd gone to such lengths to avoid me even at work. I lifted my coffee cup to my lips, blinking as I realised the cup was empty. I needed to calm down. I was losing my mind over this. It was insane. I needed, I needed - my mum.

Forget seeing Sam tonight. I could postpone it until tomorrow. I needed to talk to my mum. I needed her support. I felt like a child who had fallen off their bike, unsure if they wanted to try riding again. All I knew was that I needed to talk to the one person who understood love better than any of my siblings - Mum.

I quickly packed away my laptop, grabbed my coat, and took my empty cup to the canteen counter. “Jessy, I’m heading off for the night. I’ll meet with Sam tomorrow. Can you let him know please?”

“Sure sweetie, is everything alright?”

“Yes yes, I must go. I don’t want to miss the bus or I’ll have to wait an hour.” Her tinkling, bell-like laugh ran out, and I barely kept my fingers from plugging my ears as I hurried to the bus shelter just as it pulled in.

I lined up the steps and ferreted in my bag for my card, dropping my mobile. Damn. I swiped it back up, checking the screen for damage and noticed a message icon blinking. Scanning my card, I quickly found a seat, perching on the edge so as not to ruin my pant suit with the old gum stains dried onto the uncomfortable upholstery.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the text.

Where are you? I’m half out of my mind. Why are you not answering the phone, Frigga!!! I was tending my roses in the orangery and had the coldest of chills. I need to know you’re alright. Your brothers and sister are. Fine, you’re the only one who’s not answering. PLEASE BABY!!!

“Mum,” I whisper. How had she known my heart was breaking? Shattering into thousands of pieces and I had no clue how to glue it back together. A single tear bled down my cheek. How had she known? My mother, who was so prim and proper, so full of expectations and family values but yet so in tune with her children that she could tell from afar something was wrong?

As the bus pulled into my stop, I hit dial on Mum’s number. The phone rang for a single heartbeat before she answered. “Frigga, baby, is that you? Are you okay? I had the most awful feeling, like someone had walked over my grave.” Her voice was

cracking and I could imagine the tears of relief streaming down her face, punctuated by breathy sniffles.

“It's alright, Mum. I'm okay, really.” I tried to reassure her, but her motherly instincts were as out of control as a wildfire.

“Why don't I believe you, what aren't you telling me? Do you need money? Are you eating well? Oh god, you're pregnant!

“Mum, no! Of course I'm not pregnant. I haven't even got a boyfriend.” My pitch heightened.

“No, I suppose not, but that doesn't mean...”

“Mum, I said I'm not.”

“Of course, of course, you're a good girl. I know that I'm just worried.” She sniffed again. I rolled my eyes. She was dragging out her sniffles for sympathetic forgiveness, a manipulation card if ever I knew one, but I couldn't fight the fact that it worked. I sighed, forgiving her impertinent comment on my life. While she perfected her dramatic sniffles, I unlocked my apartment door and walked in. Holding the kettle under the faucet to fill, I put the phone down to grab a cup. I filled it with the strongest blend of coffee I still had a small reserve from back home, for when things got too intense.

“FRIGGA!”

I snatched up the mobile. “Yes, Mum?”

“You put the phone down again, didn't you?”

“I needed a coffee, Mum. I’m all set now.” I poured the boiling water into my cup and stirred in two teaspoons of sugar. I took it to the sofa and sat down.

“I suppose that’s my cue to go.” She sounded a little flat.

“Actually,”

“Yes, dear?”

“Well, there is this one thing going on. I think I messed up, like a really messed up, Mum.”

“Okay.” She took a calming breath. “Whatever it is, we can get through it, okay. Don’t worry, just tell me everything and we’ll fix it.”

“I’m not sure it can be fixed.”

“Dear, everything can be fixed.”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Let me decide that for myself”

“Well,” I sip my coffee, “there’s this guy.”

“I knew it. I knew it. There just had to be to make you stay there in that little town instead of coming home.”

“Mum, staying here has nothing to do with him. It’s where I’m happy. Where I feel whole.”

“Mmm. Well, we can talk about that later. For now, tell me about your new beau.”

“He’s not,”

“Oh, that’s the problem. Alright then, seeing as you had such a hard break up before maybe you’re feeling a little self conscious?”

“Mum, just let me speak. Please.” Sigh . “I overworked myself last week and got sick. He nursed me for two days before I insisted on returning here.”

“And rightly so.”

“Well, I kind of hurt his feelings.”

“By going home where you’re comfortable?”

“Yeah, and he might think I’m, you know, against him or his age or something.”

“So he’s older than you?”

“Are you disappointed?”

“Oh, darling, why did you believe I would be unhappy?”

“Because he’s older and not wealthy like us.”

“Oh, pish posh, you knew I agreed to marry your father when his business was only just up and coming. You silly girl, if you think he’s the one, fix it before it’s irreversible.”

“But what do I do? He’s avoiding me. He’s even changed shifts just to keep clear of

the hurt.”

“He can’t avoid you forever.”

“No, I was supposed to meet him for the artifact placement decisions tonight, but I couldn’t face him.”

“Pull yourself together. If you want this guy, fight for him. What is a little age gap in love?”

“There’s twenty-three years’ difference.” I heard her gulp.

“Okay...”

“Mum?”

“The heart wants what it wants—as Emily Dickinson would say.” I frowned. Mum loved her odd little quotes.

“Thanks, Mum.” Sniff. “That means a lot.”

“I’m sure. Now, you say he thinks you’re against him and he’s doing all he can to avoid you?”

“Mmhm.” I sip my coffee.

“Well, the ageist thing is quite simple: ask him out somewhere for coffee or to the movies.”

“But he’s avoiding me, Mum.” I sniff, trying to hold back tears.

“How can he really? You're not thinking with your head, my girl. You have this work meeting tomorrow, corner him then.”

“What if he says no?”

“Look darling, I know you're afraid and after I learned what conspired with your last boyfriend, I don't blame you. It's Valentine's Day soon. Why not ask him out then? No man will refuse a woman on Valentines,” she purred down the line.

“Well, not in your time, but now they will.”

“Stop being so pessimistic, dear, just try. There must be somewhere to go in that small town.”

“Well, there is somewhere.”

“Good. Book tickets, tables, etcetera and ask him even if you have to buy and write a card.”

“But it's on the museum's launch day.”

“Then sort it for after.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“I'm always here, dear, always. It's late, go get some rest and get a fresh start in the morning.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Mum.”

“Goodnight, darling.” I hung up, scrolled through my photos, found the pantomime

poster, and entered it into Google. The theatre page popped up. “Take a chance,” I muttered to myself, booking two seats for February 14th, Valentine’s night. With any luck, Mum would be right and Sam would say yes.

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The next day I rode to work on the bus. The theatre poster greeted me at every station, adding to the butterflies in my stomach.

“I told Sam you would meet him tonight for the finalisation of the artifacts,” Jessy’s tinkling voice chimed. “How time has flown. I can’t believe the exhibit opens on Wednesday.” She rubbed her hands in glee. “I have contacted the local papers. The canteen will be cooking up valentine cupcakes, and it’s sure to go down a treat with the locals and hopefully tagging the launch with Valentine’s Day will make a big enough attraction for tourists this half term.” She bubbled with so much excitement it was contagious and I couldn’t help but chuckle at her enthusiasm.

“You’re right. It’s not long now. Have all the orders arrived? I want to start setting up asap, so I’ve got time to fix the lighting before I meet with Sam tonight.”

“Yes, yes, dear, they’re in the stockroom and the larger display cabins are already in the exhibit space. They just need positioning where you want them.”

“Excellent.”

Shuffling items inch by inch to match the details on my design to perfection took longer than I had first expected, and by the time Jessy came to tell me she was leaving, I was covered in a thick sheen of sweat. Great, I thought as I tried to clean myself up in the toilets, splashing cool water on my face. I was going to meet the man I - I took a shaky breath. Even thinking about saying it gave me chills from the past of relationship trauma. You can do this, I told myself, looking up into the mirror. I finger combed my hair back and tied the kitty scrunchie into its thick depths. I can do this. I stared into my reflection’s eyes - you can do this. It seemed to come better

from my reflection and I found the butterflies setting their wings as I walked out into the exhibition.

“It’s amazing. You’ve brought the exhibit to life truly, Frigga. Congratulations.” I give Sam a small smile.

“I was hoping you would like it. I thought the rainbow carpet worked beautifully as the bridge to join the sectioned areas of the Yggdrasil tree.” He grinned.

“They do it more beautifully than I could have imagined.”

“Sam, I... He walked to a glass case empty of artifact

“I’ll put the hammer replica here in the dwarf section as they created it for Thor. Oh, wow, you’ve even got a hammer puzzle for the children to make.” He looked up, his eyes sparkling. “You are something special, I... he halted. “Sorry.” He gave me a sad smile. “Shall we continue, there are a few more relics in place? I only have two left to clean now, so we will be ready for Wednesday. I’ll start them tomorrow,” I urged.

“Will there be a Thor hero dressing up? I know you said it might be a good idea.”

“Yes, yes, I hired an actor last week. He will be here Wednesday morning. It was hard to get anyone with it being valentines, but the promise of high publicity convinced him.”

“I’m sure it did.”

I stifled a yawn. It had been a long day.

“You’re tired, Frigga. You should go home.”

“It’s alright.” I look at my watch. “I have another hour before the bus comes, so I’ll stay and work.”

“You can’t work if you’re exhausted again. You know what happened last time.” I blush deeply. “Let me take you home. I’ll let the night guard know I’m on a break.”

“But-”

“No arguing,” he asserted. I silenced. Maybe it would give me a better chance to ask him out, I thought as I waited for his return. Butterflies spawned in my stomach again. My palms were sweaty and as he came back and led me to his car, all my voice could do was warble.

“S... Sam, I-”

“You don’t need to explain yourself. I get it. I’m just happy you’re better.”

“No, I...”

“Frigga, I can’t hear it. My heart can’t take it. I tried to look out for you and offered my hospitality and kindness. I did nothing but look after you and at the first sign of my affections; you cut and run.”

“I’m sorry I...”

“It’s fine. Let’s just forget it and be friends. If I’m not too old to be such in your eyes.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I can’t do this right now. I’m taking you home as a courtesy. I don’t want to see you

exhausted and sick again.”

He shut me down . Gazing at my hands I thought , How am I supposed to do this? I can't. I thought I could feel the tight boa constricting my chest, draining any possibility of forming words. Something needs doing, I thought as he stopped at a red light. “I found out something interesting the other day when researching the Norse gods.” I watched his shoulders relax. Hopefully, he was open to the conversation. I waited with bated breath for him to take the bait.

“Oh, what was that?” I couldn't help the grin spread across my face as the butterflies in my stomach perked up. He didn't hate me. No matter what he said, he wouldn't talk to me if he did.

“I read that Wotan is another form of the name Odin.” He smiled and my soul lit like the brightest of flames, desperate for its attention.

“Yes, it's true. My parents were artifact hunters and highly into their mythology.”

“Were?”

“They passed away a few years ago.”

“I'm sorry,” I tug at my hair band. “It must be hard.”

“Mmhm. They were older. But their absence still makes my heart ache.”

“I understand,” I whispered, drawing a glance at him.

“What do you mean?” The boa around my heart constricted tighter as I tugged at my scrunchie and dry gulped.

“My little brother he...” His hand touched mine, its warmth seeing off the boa constrictor as a single tear fell from my eye. Sniff . “There was an accident. He was with our big sister Jainy. We both were. He dared me to touch the bottom of the lake at Jainy’s lake house. Well, I did it. He said he could do it faster but his leg got caught up in some weeds and...” A sob escapes me and the squeezing pressure of his hand draws me back to the present. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I told you, we all have scars, we just wear them differently.” He pulled up at the curb. “Do you want me to walk you in?” My heart screamed yes, but my subconscious was stuck viewing my drowned brother on repeat.

“No, I’m okay, I-” He stopped the car.

“Come on.” He led me to my door and waited for me to open it. The warmth of his closeness seemed to thaw me from that awful memory as he led me to my sofa and prepared some sweet tea.

He is so thoughtful, so sensitive. “Thank you,” I said softly, accepting the tea. “Why don’t you have a cup?”

“No, I don’t think that would be a good idea. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.

“Please?”

“Another time. Take it easy, okay?” His warm hand patted my shoulder, sending warmth and support webbing through me. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow. And, Frigga, I’m sorry about your brother.”

I stared at him, teary-eyed, as he shut the door. “Thank you,” I whispered to the empty room that somehow felt chilly now he had gone. I shivered, sipped my sweet

tea and curled up in my sofa blanket, turning the TV on. I couldn't believe I told him that. I let my hair down, pulling the scrunchie onto my wrist. The hello kitty on it was a little faded now, but I had worn it every day since my brother's death, so I would never forget him. It had been a birthday present in the final year of his life and Mum had helped him choose it himself. We were so close. All of our other siblings were much older and being the younger ones we were always together studying, playing until... Sniff . I missed him so much. Sometimes I could even swear he was watching over me. I let out a soft chuckle and closed my eyes, dreaming of the life if my brother was still alive.

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The next morning, I kept to my normal routine, my energy a little less than usual. I added an extra teaspoon of coffee powder to my drink and walked into the museum to start my day. Thinking about my little brother had left me feeling drained, but then I saw Sam had spent all night placing each artifact in its uniquely lit display case in the exhibit. It was so stunning it brought a tear to my eye as Mr Wallace walked in.

“Miss Smith, I am impressed. The exhibit is beautiful. You and Sam work well together.”

“Thank you, Mr Wallace. Does that mean I can count on a good reference from you?”
I chew my lip.

“Of course. But I rather had something else in mind,” he muttered. I frowned.

“I’m sorry I don’t understand”.

“You will.” With that, he walked away, leaving me frowning in his wake.

I spun around like a child, taking everything in at once, the beauty of the exhibit astounded me, the colours swarmed like thousands of glow bugs dancing in my spinning vision. I did it. I really did it.

Smiling, I stopped spinning and took a moment to center myself again. Alright Frigga, get it together, you have a lot to tick off before opening tomorrow. I pulled out the list I’d had written this morning and began checking each section of the display in turn, making sure the children's puzzle pieces were disturbed enough to look inviting yet not messy, checking the display cabinets were free of smears and

that the carpets were hoovered and ruffled so their colours shone through better. Everything had to be perfect.

At lunch time, I stopped for a coffee and noticed the little Thor cupcakes with fondant hammers I ordered, were only to be met by the most exquisite of flavours - strawberries. My mind reeled, reliving the scent I was so fond of and stirring up others it too enjoyed. One being Sam's cologne, his musty warmth. My heart grew wings, threatening to fly away on a cloud of masculine scent it adored so as Jessy wheeled over to my table, her frizzy red hair dishevelled as always.

"Hi sweetie, those cupcakes look good."

"Mmm, they are, you should have one."

"I'd rather know what's going on with you and Sam these days. You two seem so distant yet there are times I catch you both glancing at each other when you pass for shift changes and I can see the attraction in your eyes. So what's holding you back? Why don't you say anything? Him I can understand, he's always been quite standoffish but you seem so confident, so sure of yourself. Why don't you ask him out?"

"I-"

"I know, I know," she held her hands up in a placating gesture, "It's none of my business but, in my opinion, you two are perfect for each other."

"I'm planning on asking him out."

"Oh yay!" she giggled like a child. "When?"

"Valentines, after the opening." Her eyes sparkled.

“Oh, that's so romantic. Hey, if you guys hit it off and get married then we can call our Norse exhibit one of those life changing enchantments. Mr Wallace would like that I-”

“Wow, wow no. Slow down, I said nothing about marriage or even a second date. Besides, he'll probably say no. He is still angry with me about the age thing.” She raised an eyebrow.

“The age thing?”

“I might have said a few things I regret.”

“Oh no, sweetie.” She grasped my hand from across the table, squeezing it gently. “He's a good man, I'm sure he'll forgive you.”

“I'm nervous just the same.” I felt the truth flutter around my stomach with lazy wings. “I don't know if I can go through with it.”

“You'll know when the time is right, have faith. Besides, tomorrow is Valentine's Day. There's a thousand people asking ‘will you go out with me’. More than half of them will be rejected.”

“I'm not sure that's a comforting thought, Jessy.”

“Oh no, sweetie, I mean that you're not alone and you'll be one of the lucky ones I'm sure.”

“Maybe.” I stood, pushing my chair back with a deafening squeak that had Jessy screw up her eyes as she cringed. “I have to get back to work now.”

“I thought you were all done?”

“I am but I just want to make one-hundred percent sure everything is as it should be. What time are the preppers arriving?”

“For the grand unveiling and Mr Wallace’s cutting of the ribbon with the Thor character at eleven.”

“Brilliant, I’ll make sure I’m here plenty early then to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

“Wonderful.” Jessy grinned as I wandered back to check the artifact lighting was spot on. Even after my fourth check of the exhibit my nerves still fluttered around my stomach like food poisoning. I kept trying to tell myself this was my first design job and I’ve done great. I kept up my mantra as I waved goodbye to Jessy some hours later and boarded the bus home. But the pressure at what the public the papers would think was overwhelming, bringing tears to my eyes when I finally sat down. I did this, without using my family’s name. I studied hard, got the job and pulled off the exhibit. But for tonight, I would allow myself to feel relief in every tear that dripped down my face, for tomorrow I would feel ecstatic.

Opening day!

I hadn't slept much all night. I couldn't stop my heart racing at the thought of talking to Sam. What if he said no, how would I cope? I wondered though the obvious answer was, as usual, right before me. But then again what if he said yes? What did that mean for us, for my life, my family? Mother said she had no qualms with me dating an older man but I'm sure father would adopt some if he took offence to the idea.

I clicked on the kettle and waited for it to boil. Today, I had to do something special with my appearance, something extra that would gain Sam's appreciative eye, to soften him into hearing my declaration. The ping of the kettle drew me sharply from my musings and I poured the water into my cup, savouring the bitter aroma of the dark blend coffee as it swirled up to greet me with as much abandon as a warm shower after the rain. I took a sip, humming in appreciation as the molten liquid slid down my throat.

It was one of those days where I was too nervous to eat anything for breakfast despite actually having something in my cupboards other than noodles. Mum would laugh though I would be the one laughing when she discovered I had simply added the carb filled taste of toaster waffles. I grinned. I wish she could have come to the opening of my first interior design job but father and her had decided to go away on an extended business trip to elevate the family to new heights. More likely one of my siblings was pondering a proposal and awaiting their blessing - or not.

I sipped another calming mouthful of coffee and headed to the bathroom, looking into the tall mirror above the sink. Should I wear louder makeup? Change my hair? I don't

know, I thought, swirling my hair into a bun and looking this way and that.

I painted my eyeshadow a little darker, trying to highlight the natural blue of my eyes. I added a little blush to my face making sure there was no hint of fatigue left from my week's work. What to do with my hair? I thought, looking into the mirror to admire my reflection. Was a pony tail too simple? I started to French braid my mid length hair, creating a crown like facade. Okay, Frigga you can do this. I straightened my suit trousers, pairing them with a pale pink blouse, grabbed my bags and phone and left the house.

As always, the walk to the bus stop was peaceful early in the morning, the sun was covered in a dust of clouds barely waking to a new day. I shook off the cool morning air. The scent of damp grass filling my nose made me sneeze. Someone's thinking of you , mother would say. I gave a small smile. As my heartbeat sped up at the sight of the pantomime poster the dame on it seemed to be blowing me a kiss. I chuckled, those were good omens. I would be okay. Whatever happened. I nodded to the bus driver as I stepped on, swiping my card and taking a perch on the edge of a seat. It was a little earlier than my usual bus, meaning the interior was strangely peaceful with the purring of the engine. It soothed the butterflies awakening in my stomach and calmed the raging of my overzealous heart.

“Have a nice day, Miss,” the bus driver offered as I hesitantly exited the bus. This was the last time I’d be making this journey , I thought, a pain stabbing my chest. I had come to love this strange old museum, to respect and enjoy every outlandish chip and chitter from Jessy and every just-off moody smile from Mr Wallace.

“Frigga sweetie!”

“Hey Jessy, everything running smoothly?”

“Yep, all ready. Just waiting to hear back from the actor. I got a message about car trouble.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, but he reassures me he’ll be here in time so don’t worry.” She grinned but I couldn’t help the nerves that ate at me.

“What about Mr Wallace?”

“Oh, he’s in the blue room. The press will be here at eleven and Sam should be around here somewhere.” I blushed a little at the mention of Sam, Jessy grinned. “Your hair looks good, he’ll definitely notice.” She gave me a conspiratorial wink as I walked past the desk to check the light was on the correct dimness so as not to damage any of the artifacts.

Content everything was as close to perfect as I could manage, I doubled back, hunting for Sam but after clearing the exhibit twice, I still hadn’t discovered where he was hiding. I walked back to the desk where Jessy stood, a worried look clouding her face, her brows knotted as she growled down the phone

“What’s happened?” She waved her hand to shush me

“Is it Sam, is he okay?” I couldn’t help but hold my breath, trying to eavesdrop, my chest constricting tighter and tighter. She rolled her eyes, instantly I could breathe again.

“Jessy!” bellowed Mr Wallace, storming from the blue room. “Where’s this actor? The crowds are forming and the press van just pulled up.”

“I’m on it.”

“Frigga, I need to speak to you alone and then we’ll sort this mess out. Jessy, the children expect Thor. Find me Thor or find me a costume!”

“Yes sir!” Jessy, tearing up, put the phone down and started rifling through contacts as Mr Wallace spoke to me, laying out his thoughts on my future and then ordering me to help sort out the Thor mess. All the while Sam was nowhere to be seen. He was probably hiding out in the stockroom, polishing some kind of artifact.

“Jessy, talk to me.”

“The actor got his car going again and then the bloody thing just packed up.” She threw her hands in the air. “What am I gonna do? Mr Wallace is relying on me.”

“How about one of us dress up as Thor? The children won't know the difference and there's got to be a costume shop somewhere.”

“It's a good idea but the closest costume shop is in the city and the crowd is waiting.”

“Do you know anyone who's into comic books? They may have a costume we can borrow.”

“No. I don't.” She began to sob. “I don't know what to do, Frigga.” I gave her a quick hug, my heart melting at her despair as my mind ticked over with possibilities.

“Where's Sam?”

“He went out to tie the ribbon for Mr Wallace and the mayor to cut.”

“Right, get him in here, grab one of those Thor dress up helmets and hammer we're selling in the gift shop.”

“That's a good idea, but it wont work. The kids these days know their stuff.”

“Trust me.” My mind raced, trying to recall where I had seen a silver breastplate – the medieval exhibit that had been packed away and boxed ready to ship to another

museum. Oh please god, let it still be here. I raced through to the storage room and ferreted through boxes. Sam would likely kill me for messing up his system but Mr Wallace and the museum would be saved from looking like fools in the Etenham newspaper. Besides, I would help him clean it up. I smiled, more time with the man who made my heart thunder in my ears until only his voice was heard over the cacophony.

I moved another box, dropping wood shavings and straw all over the floor until finally my hands landed on the hard cold metal of the breastplate. I pulled it out, a grin on my face staring back at my reflection. Thank god Sam had polished it before packing it away. I dragged the heavy mass out and back to reception where Sam stood staring at me, shaking his head.

“Please just trust me. Put the breastplate and helmet on.”

“But I look nothing like Thor.”

“You will, I promise. Now Jessy, help him put it on.” I hurry away again heading into Mr Wallace's office where his prized roman armour stood century. Carefully, I detached the soft robe. Mr Wallace was going to kill me , I thought. But he said ‘do anything’ to fix it. I chewed my lip as I hurried back to reception. “Here, put the cloak on.”

Jessy stood back, gasping tears flooded her cheeks. “You did it, Frigga!”

“I told you I would fix it.” Sam glared at me. “Just think, you can answer all the children’s questions easily.”

“I look like an idiot,” he protested.

“You look like the modern day depiction of the god of thunder.” He straightened at that, his pride reforming and my stomach knotted. “Go get them.” I grinned as he

walked out, plastic hammer swinging in one hand, his Roman's cloak gliding like a red carpet with every step he took. Sigh . Jessy chuckled.

“He sure does look tempting.”

“Mmm. He makes a good Thor.” I watched with pride. I didn't deserve to feel my chest swelling as I watched the ribbon being cut and Sam led the children inside, laughing and joking with them. A wide grin spread across my face as I helped Jessy run the entrance till and later on the gift shop. The day went past at a phenomenal speed and before we knew it Jessy was turning the sign on the door to closed. Mr Wallace appeared, his face stern as he strode towards me.

“Miss Smith, if I wasn't so grateful for you saving the open day I would fire you. How dare you desecrate my Roman armour.”

“I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean any offence. I just put it together after Jessy said there was no costume shop in town and I”-

“Saved the day.” I blushed a little as behind him Sam appeared, shrugging out of his costume and handing the robe to Mr Wallace, who delicately folded it and took it away.

“I'll take the armour.” Jessy's voice tinkled as she wheeled her chair out from behind the counter. Sam carefully placed it on her lap and she wheeled away, winking at me, but before I had time to speak Sam asked,

“So where will you go now? Are there any interior design jobs local?”

“Actually, Mr Wallace asked me to stay on with the museum for future exhibitions and I agreed.” I smiled, my blood pressure raised a little, drawing a blush on my cheeks.

“You’re staying? That’s great news! I mean, the museum would miss you.” His doe eyes glittered like smokey quartz.

I couldn’t deny the butterflies in my stomach as they fluttered in adoration. I flicked my eyes down shyly. I felt this tingling in my every cell. Yes, he’s very happy and it means I can stay living in my aunt's house.

“What will you do in between exhibits for work?”

“I’m thinking of branching out as a small interior decorator so it’s along the same lines of my work, just a little more basic. I mean, you never know, dungarees may suit me.” I chuckled lightly.

He reached out, tilting my chin just the slightest fraction so our eyes met, a cosmos of shooting stars erupting as our eyes connected, our souls gazed.

“Sam, I...” His lips crashed into mine, the pressure firm but tender as the plump wetness of his tongue licked the seam of my strawberry-glossed lips with abandon, drawing them open for him to bridge the rainbow of true love to Asgard. My body tingled like a sparkler, every cell bursting with sensation. Somehow he had opened the door to my heart, the butterflies constantly fluttering in my stomach morphed, budding into daisies in full bloom, settling any doubts.

I instantly missed the touch of his lips as he pulled back, staring unsurely into my eyes. I could feel his heart racing from our bodies touching.

“Sam,” I looked up at him through heavy love-dusted eyelids.

“Don’t.” He shook his head. “It’s just... as its Valentines, I thought I might stand a chance but just let me keep the memory, okay.?” He pulled away, his distance making my heart cold.

“Sam.” He turned back, a hollow look on his face. I took a deep breath, gazed into his eyes and spoke from my heart. “I never meant to offend you. I want you to understand. I have feelings for you. I think I-”

“I love you too.” He turned back, swooping me into a hug so tight our hearts embraced. The grin on my face lit my eyes with stardust. “You know, Odin and Frigga were destined to be like you and I, Valentine sweethearts for eternity.”

“Does that mean you will come to the pantomime with me?”

“Do you have tickets?”

“Yes.” He grinned. “I will go anywhere with you.”

“Mum was right.”

“What?”

“She said I should take a chance.”

“Sweet Frigga,” he stroked my cheek. “Everyone has their heart broken at some point, but it is always worth the chance that the next person will sew it back together and cherish it like the world it is to them - to me.” A wide grin spread across my face at his beautiful words.

“Will you be my boyfriend?”

“No.” My face dropped, my heart plummeting. He lifted my chin, my bottom lips wobbling as he gazed into my eyes. “But I’ll be your man friend.”

“Jerk,” I chuckled, a teary sound. He smiled back.

“Together at last. This Valentines has to be the best ever.”

“Wait until next year.”