

Prologue

Asgard

Iduna gathered her apples, carefully plucking them from the sacred tree. As the goddess of youth and caretaker of the apples that gave the gods their immortality, she was tasked with harvesting the fruit daily and carrying a basketful to the hall of the gods to hand out.

As she made her way to the grand hall where the gods waited, a familiar youth fell into step beside her. For days now, everywhere Iduna went, the same charming young man had appeared out of nowhere, retrieving her handkerchief when she dropped it, gripping her elbow when she was jostled in the marketplace, and offering to carry her basket of apples. It might have bothered her if he wasn't so charming.

"We meet again," he said with his cheeky grin.

"Indeed," she answered. "What brings you to the city of the gods?"

"I'm hoping to apprentice to the god of archery. Ull is training me to shoot an arrow through the eye of a gnat."

Iduna smiled at the thought. The lad seemed too slight to wield a bow. She should shoo him away, but honestly, she rather enjoyed his company. It wasn't often anyone spoke to her, and it got lonely tending to her tree all alone.

"Humans aren't usually allowed in Asgard," she replied. "How did you come to be invited?"

"My father is famous for making the best bows in all of Midgard," he boasted. "He sent me to bring one to Ull as a gift in return for my training."

Iduna's foot hit a rock, and she tumbled, spilling her basket of precious apples across the paving stones.

"Here, let me help." The young man hurried to gather them up in his shirttail, then returned to dump them in her basket.

"Thank you," she said, nursing her stinging palms. "I don't know how I tripped." She looked around, but there was no sign of a stone out of place. "I guess I'm clumsy today. What did you say your name was?"

The young man sketched a short bow. "Vertulious, at your service." He held one of her sacred apples in his hands, frowning as he polished it on his shirt. "I'm afraid this one is bruised, surely unfit for a god. You don't mind if I keep it, do you?"

All good humor left her. “Those belong to the gods.” She held her hand out, suddenly wary of the sly look in his eyes.

He dropped the apple onto her palm. “Well, then you should keep a close eye on them. You wouldn’t want one to go missing.” He tapped his fingers to his forehead and spun around, cheerily whistling as he marched off.

Iduna watched him go, a slight shiver running up her spine. She carefully counted the apples in her basket, relieved when she accounted for them all.



Vertulious could barely contain his excitement. After so many years of searching, he had found the sacred garden and the goddess who oversaw it. His hand went to the round globe in his cloak pocket. She hadn’t seen him tuck it away as he’d gathered the spilled fruit, replacing the one he’d taken with an ordinary apple. One god would not gain the customary life-restoring powers the apples offered—instead he or she would experience mild discomfort, perhaps a headache or an ache in their bones, and then would partake of another magical apple tomorrow and forget all about it.

While he would harvest everything there was to know about this apple. Every element. Every ingredient. Until he unlocked its secrets.

Eager to get back to his laboratory, Vertulious was making his way to the Bifrost bridge, the passageway back to Midgard, when a sharp voice called out.

“Say, boy, what are you doing in the city of the gods?” Vertulious held still, reminding himself he was but a hapless youth. “Nothing, your godness.” He turned, and his tongue grew thick as he took in the forbidding figure of Thor, god of thunder and Son of Odin. He was standing in his carriage pulled by his two brawny goats, their wicked horns as thick as a man’s arm and curving back to sharp points. His famed hammer, Mjolnir, was strapped to his side. Around his waist he wore his Belt of Strength, and his famed gauntlets—large golden gloves—encased his hands.

“I’ve seen you hanging around here for a few days,” the god said, “but no one seems to know who you are or why you are here.”

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