

"And so the ancient race of the Shee left Albia to search for a new home, leaving the Norns and Grendels to fend for themselves... or however this story goes." A human man, around sixty years or so in age, sighed as he set down the tablet he'd been reading from. "Did the Shee ever intend to return at any point? Because the reports I read on the Shee suggested that they were industrious, building living spaceships and all that..."

"Honestly? Beats me." The woman piloting the spaceship shrugged as she tapped a few controls to set the ship into autopilot, leaning back in her seat. "According to the reports we got, we're approaching a Shee spaceship that was just... left here."

The man scoffed. "Don't tell me. They said they were going to get milk and never came back."

"Maybe. But reports from nearby planets said that the Shee who were piloting the ship ended up in a bad way and had to leave. Still, we should see what we find."

It didn't take long until their ship was docked near to the abandoned Shee spaceship.

Once they'd docked, the pilot nudged her companion. "Come on, Dr. Quaid. Suit up, we're here."

"Courtney, please. Just Hubert is fine." The doctor stood up and got dressed in his environmental suit, nodding to Courtney. "Whatever we find here, it's still best to report back. I'm sure Raphael will be interested in our data."

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The engineering area of the abandoned Shee starship seemed to be powered somewhat. Flickering lights illuminated the corridors, and the whirring of machinery filled the too-still air. Hubert and Courtney made their way down the corridor, stopping at a button.

"Looks like this is an elevator system. Hope it still works." Pressing the button, the doctor stepped back as a whir from above signalled movement. The elevator bubble slid down into place, the door opening.

"It seems a little too quiet." Courtney boarded the elevator and when her colleague was inside, she pressed the button to go to the next floor.

One side of the corridor seemed darker than the other. Clicking on his flashlight, Hubert stepped forward and looked around. Egg-shaped pods were next to what looked like a screen.

As he got closer, the lights flickered on and the screen seemed to expand in size. Turning off the flashlight, Hubert looked at the screen and saw the flashing words: 'Gene Splicer Online'.

"Gene splicer...? What were the Shee doing with their creations?" He asked the question to no-one in particular as he tried to look through the screens, finally finding something that looked interesting. "Courtney. Look at this. The last entry on what appears to be gene splicing records."

When Courtney took a look at the record, Hubert frowned. "Authorised by an unknown individual. Splice donors listed as unknown..." She muttered to herself though her colleague could still hear. "What does this mean?"

"I did translate the symbols and from what it says... Norn donor and Grendel donor, not named... complete DNA extraction done, splice successful following complete deconstruction of donor lifeforms..."

Courtney stepped back, a look of sheer horror on her face. "... They... deconstructed the donor creatures? Did they even know it was a death sentence?" Wide eyes stared at her colleague. "Those poor creatures... oh... are there any even left on this ship?"

"Let's keep searching..."

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Over the course of their search of the starship, Hubert and Courtney had discovered several bioactive terrariums that had a strong ecosystem established. One of the terrariums even had a side room that contained a teaching tool, and when powered, it turned out that this tool taught words in humanoid language. Hopefully, this meant that if there were any creatures on board the ship that hadn't been devoured by the gene splicer (in Courtney's words), that there could be some communication.

The next terrarium that the duo entered appeared to be a humid jungle, the sounds of various bugs providing some impressive background noise while larger critters made other sounds. An oddly discordant symphony of grunts and hisses accompanied the two as they pushed forward through the plants,

Hubert ducked behind an old log and pulled Courtney down when he caught sight of a very large scaled creature with long ears, bright red eyes, a piglike nose and a head of blond hair. He gasped. "That looks like a Grendel!"

"Looks big and mean..."

"Adult male, from the data we have. He seems to be patrolling the territory. I see some female Grendels, so maybe they're his family." The scientist stood up. "I'll

see if he's willing to talk."

"We're not equipped to deal with hostiles if he turns out to be unfriendly!" Courtney hissed, trying to pull her colleague back, but Hubert was unfazed. "Son of a— *ugh!*"

The moment Hubert stepped out of his hiding place and stepped forward, the large Grendel rounded on him, letting out a low growl. He stood still and tried to look as nonthreatening as possible.

For a moment the Grendel paused, before leaning in and sniffing him. Hubert had to hold his breath. He'd heard stories of how Grendels absolutely *stunk* from their environment, and it turned out those were all true.

After a moment, the Grendel grunted. "Not familiar. Not threat."

"I mean no harm, sir..." Hubert took a breath, holding up his hands. "I'm just here in the purposes of science and understanding. You see, me and my colleague—"

From her hiding spot, Courtney hissed at him to not reveal her position, but it was too late. The Grendel huffed at him, stepping closer to the spot and yanking her out by the arm, sniffing at her.

"Um... nice doggy..." She whimpered as the Grendel sniffed at her some more before dropping her to the jungle floor unceremoniously.

"Not threat. Smell too nice."

Courtney stood up, rubbing at her rump. "Lovely to meet you too," she grumbled. She noticed that the large Grendel was circling Hubert again.

"You. With Norns?"

"No, sir. As a matter of fact, we haven't come across any Norns since we came here..."

The Grendel seemed to be pleased with that. But then he took a breath and his scaled shoulders sagged in what the scientist could see was relief. "Thank the stars. I'm tired of the big dumb brute act."

Both Hubert and Courtney seemed confused, but they could see a small smile cross the Grendel's face.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Loki, and I'm the protector of this lounge. There's a group of really angry Norns in one of the other terrariums, and they despise us for... some reason. But as long as I keep up the act of being the big dumb angry brute, they usually leave us alone."

"A lounge? So... Grendels are like lizards, huh?" Hubert nodded as he spoke. "Well, either way, it's lovely to be properly acquainted, Loki. My name is Dr. Hubert Quaid. I'm here on an expedition to learn more about the ancient race of the Shee and their creations."

Courtney cleared her throat. "Courtney Isenbaum. I'm here as a second pair of hands for the good doctor."

Loki sniffed the two humans again, letting out a quiet grunt. "What species are you? Your kind is unfamiliar, yet you can speak the common language of intelligent species."

"We're humans, Loki. Definitely not as strong as Grendels..."

"And we don't smell awful—" Courtney said, but Loki gave her a mildly angered huff. "I mean— it's probably the jungle that makes you smell that way."

"I see. Thank you for telling me."

For a while there was only the chirping of the jungle insects while Hubert and Courtney took a look around, though they were not immune from Loki's scrutinising gaze. There were other Grendels around, and they seemed to be a bit agitated.

"Loki... pardon me, but your fellow Grendels appear to be on edge." Hubert had seen similar in other reptilian species. "... Those angry Norns you spoke of, have they come through here recently?"

"They did. About two days ago. Three of them marched in here. I was able to fend two of them off, but the third one got in a few lucky strikes on some of our offspring. And that same one kidnapped my mate. I was going to rescue her, but that brute landed a few harsh blows on me. I'm still not recovered."

Hubert had noticed that Loki was walking with something of a limp, and when he looked closer, he could see deep gashes around the hip. "Maybe we could help you get your mate back, Loki!"

Courtney looked at her colleague as if he'd grown a second head. "Excuse me? Us, against these really angry Norns? Are you insane?!"

"It could work! Just like Loki didn't know about us, those Norns won't know either! We could sneak in, find Loki's mate and—"

"That's suicide, Hubert! We're scientists, not fighters!"

They were interrupted by Loki's saddened huff.

Courtney sighed. "Loki— Don't take this the wrong way, but we're just not equipped to take on a pack of angry Norns. I'm sorry about your mate, truly, but —"

"No. Don't explain it, Courtney. At this point I've accepted that— that she's lost to me. Oh, my sweet Grendella... we were trying so *hard* to have a child of our own, but despite our every effort she hasn't laid a single egg yet..."

Hubert winced at the Grendel's story. "Then that settles it. We *have* to find her! Maybe then I can run some tests and see why she's failing to conceive..." He paused, holding up a small device. "If I may, Loki... may I take a small DNA sample? I do need some insights into Grendel DNA. It'll just be a quick blood draw."

"If it will help your search, go for it." Loki seated himself on a nearby rock, his heavy tail curling by his side.

Hubert pulled on a pair of disposable gloves, showing Loki the syringe he was using to draw up the blood sample. He even explained every bit of the procedure while quickly taking the blood sample, depositing it into a vial which he then attached to a small portable machine. While he was waiting for the machine to work, he bagged up all of the used items and put them in a container.

"Thank you, Loki. I can take a look at that to see what we're dealing with. Now, about getting Grendella back from those Norns..."

Courtney frowned. "I still think you're insane, but our boss would probably do the same if he were here. If we go into that other terrarium smelling like the Grendels then we're going to be killed."

The doctor gasped. "I've got it! Loki said that the Norns see him and his lounge as big, dumb, angry brutes, right? So... we fake being attacked."

"And like— pretend we got mauled or something?"

"Exactly. We'd just need to make it look as if there's been a struggle of some kind. We act as if we're hurting and in pain, then maybe the Norns will take pity on us and we can look for Grendella."

The two of them overheard Loki talking to another Grendel, but they couldn't quite hear what he was saying. Eventually though, a rather stockily-built female Grendel wandered up behind them, tapping Hubert on the shoulder.

"You. Human. Loki told me of your plan."

"And?" The scientist arched a brow. "Will you help us?"

"Yes. Hope you don't mind being roughhoused!"

Loki spoke up. "Make your way to the sliding door over there! That'll take you to where the Norns are. Mizora will do her part on the way!"

"O-Oh, I—" Hubert was interrupted as Mizora shoved both him and Courtney towards the door.

"Sorry. But your ploy will be more believable to the Norns if that's *real* adrenaline coursing in your veins." She shoved them both again, letting out a low growl. "Go! Run for the door!"

The two humans needed no further convincing. Hubert and Courtney ran for the doorway while Mizora was hot on their tail. She'd managed to grab Hubert and slam him into the mud, though she quickly helped him up again and shoved him forward. Courtney yelped as she nearly took a swipe from Mizora's claws.

As they made it to the opening doors, Hubert paused just as Mizora kicked Courtney into him, the two humans being bowled over from the impact. They scrambled backwards as the door slid closed, taking a few deep breaths.

Once the very real rush of adrenaline cleared, they found themselves looking up at a projection of a blue sky, the sounds of birds chirping in the distance.

Hubert slowly stood up, groaning. "Ow... oh, my ribs..." Clutching at his chest a little, he started to look around. They'd been pushed onto a wooden walkway with an elevator platform.

A distant beep sounded and the elevator rose up, revealing two creatures that definitely did not look like Grendels.

"Those aren't like the other ones we saw..."

As the creatures stepped out of the elevator, one of them sniffed, its tail flicking in agitation. "Grendel stench! Heads up!"

Hubert yelped in surprise, holding his hands up defensively. "W-Wait—! We just got out of Grendel territory!"

"It's true, we... we were attacked!" Courtney tried to brush off some of the debris from her clothes. "We had to run before those Grendels savaged us!"

"Hmm. You were lucky to get out of there with... relatively minor injuries." The taller of the two creatures, looking more like a female of the species from what scant info they had, moved closer, eventually narrowing its large eyes at Hubert. "You look like one of those science types."

"A-Ah yes. Correct." The scientist cleared his throat. "Dr. Hubert Quaid. I'm a biologist travelling from afar to uncover the mysteries of the Shee and their creations. And you are...?"

"Ashra. Leader of this Norn troop." As she spoke, she gave the scientist a look over. "You must be shaken after being attacked by Grendels."

"Very much so..."

After a bit of discussion between Ashra and the other Norn who was with her, Hubert and Courtney were led into the elevator and down to an encampment nearer the terrarium floor.

The two humans could see the way the Norns were milling about and getting on with their days. They didn't seem as angry as Loki made them out to be, Hubert thought to himself, but maybe there were territorial rules he wasn't understanding.

An older female Norn served them some crude tea while another came over with some sponges and a bowl of water. Ashra sat opposite the two humans, folding her arms.

"Drink, wash yourselves. We can speak more when you're clean."

The tea tasted bitter and gritty, but Hubert swallowed it down out of politeness. Courtney found the drink far too bitter to stomach. After scrubbing themselves clean as much as they could, taking it in turns to wash each others' harder to reach spots, the scientist sighed.

"I— Thank you, Ashra. Your kindness is much appreciated. I just hope none of my equipment is broken after that..."

While Hubert checked over his equipment, Courtney addressed the Norn leader. "You know... we heard rumours that your troop was harbouring a Grendel."

Ashra scoffed. "From *where*? I doubt the Grendels who ran you out would have said anything. They're big ugly brutes." She gave Courtney a hard stare. "Where did you hear this rumour?"

"She must be talking about what we overheard from a couple of Ettins." Hubert quickly filled in the blank for her before going back to checking his gear.

"So you ran into the Ettin troop before your Grendel run-in. What would they know, they seem content to steal our gadgets to the point of us having to send parties to get them back. Speaking of, don't let them get hold of your equipment. If they do, good luck getting it back."

"Thank you for the tip, Ashra." Courtney nodded lightly. "Does their rumour even hold any weight?"

"... Yes. It's true." Ashra spoke matter-of-factly. "She's kept in good conditions, but since she's been brought here, those Grendels don't dare to attack us. In a

way, her staying here has brought some sort of truce."

"Doesn't she get homesick?" Hubert said as he pulled out his DNA scanning device, checking it over. "Surely even despite good hospitality, she misses the company of her own? Many creatures in the various animal kingdoms much prefer the company of their own kind." He paused. "Good news is that my equipment is all in working order. Ashra, if I may... could I take a DNA sample? I would love to know more about Norn biology."

"Go on then." Ashra sat back and allowed Hubert to work. Like he had done with Loki before, he explained every part of the procedure to her while doing it. Once he was done, he patted her shoulder and smiled.

"Thank you..."

"Mm." Ashra nodded. "You two must be exhausted. It's time for the main troop to sleep, so you should rest too while it's quieter. We don't usually have guests, but I asked a few Norns to prepare a little sleeping area for the two of you."

She stood, encouraging the two humans to follow her. Leading them to a secluded area of the encampment, a crude bedroll had been stretched out under a canopy of woven leaves, with a cluster of fireflies to provide light and warmth. Hubert gave a nod in thanks and he laid down on the bedroll, encouraging Courtney to lay with him.

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Hubert couldn't sleep. Despite the Norns' efforts to ensure a comfortable resting spot, his old bones did not agree with laying on the floor. Sitting up, he could see that Courtney was sleeping soundly. Not wanting to wake her, he carefully slipped out of the leafy canopy and looked around.

As Ashra had said, a majority of the troop was sleeping, though there were some Norns patrolling. The scientist moved through the darker areas, going into places that he hadn't seen on his initial pass through when he and his colleague were being shown around.

Eventually he came across an area of the encampment that was clearly dishevelled, a smell that he couldn't quite place filling his nostrils. The sound of muffled crying could be heard.

Following the sound, Hubert came across what appeared to be a female Grendel in a crude cage. The floor around the cage was clearly not taken care of, and the captive appeared to be cold as well as deeply upset.

The scientist stepped closer, taking hold of the bars. "Excuse me. Are... are you... are you Grendella?"



The Grendel sniffled, trying to wipe her eyes. Lifting her head up as much as her strength would allow, she nodded in confirmation.

"So Loki was right! You *were* captured by the Norns!"

Grendella picked herself up as much as she could, crawling over to the bars and giving the scientist a look with melancholic crimson eyes. "You... you know Loki?" Her voice was weak and shaky. "B-But I heard the Norns talking about how two humans, one of them fitting the description of what I see about you, got attacked..."

"It was all a ploy, Grendella. I figured if I faked being attacked, I could come and get you out of here. Loki misses you so very much..." Reaching through the bars, Hubert gently patted Grendella's scaly cheek. "I don't yet know *how*, but I'll find a way."

"If the Norns figure you out, they'll ruin you. And the other human you're with." Grendella sighed. "It's okay... you should go while you still can. Tell Loki that I'll always love him. And... whatever happens, it will always be worth it..."

"I'm *going* to get you out of here. I'll be careful, Grendella. I promise."

Hubert slipped away from the cage before the Norn patrol could catch him, going back into the canopy to see that Courtney was awake.

She gave him a long look. "Where were you?"

"I was taking a walk because I couldn't sleep. But, good news, I found where they're holding Grendella. Ashra was lying about the conditions she was being kept in though. We have to get her out of there."

"How, though?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. I do know how we can stay here though, and that's to act as if we're doing field studies on Norn behaviour. That way Ashra and her troop won't suspect us. In the meantime, we keep our eyes peeled. This quieter time means there's fewer patrols and prying eyes, so this is the best time to bust Grendella out. After that, we'd need to find the quickest and most secluded route back to the jungle..."

"Okay. So we split up a little and do... field studies. We find where the Norns look the least. And then once we're ready, we bust Grendella out, get her back to Loki and then problem solved, right?"

"Mm-hmm. That's the theory, anyway."

Courtney pulled the tie from her bright red hair, shaking it out and combing fingers through it before she re-tied it into its usual bun. "You're still completely

nuts, but it's not the first time we've done a batshit thing for science. Okay. Starting from tomorrow, field studies."

"And maybe I'll ask for a comfier bedroll. These old bones do not like hard ground."

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Over the course of several weeks, under the guise of field studies, Hubert and Courtney had learned a lot about the layout of the Norn encampment, the patrol routes, when it was quieter and when there was the most activity. On some quiet nights Hubert had gone to check in with Grendella and sneak her some food so that she could start regaining some of her strength.

One quiet night, the two humans put together all their findings. Hubert started drawing up a plan.

"I think I have the fastest way out. Instead of going up the elevator towards the door directly to the jungle, we take the lower path that leads to the ship's bridge through the giant door under the bioactive floor of the terrarium. Then from there, we can take the door to the jungle that we went through initially."

Courtney nodded. "So we break Grendella out, avoid the patrols and get down to the lower path? Do they patrol that lower path?"

"There is a patrol that does go that way, but it's not a frequent patrol. So... we should be home free once the patrol passes through. By now the patrol around Grendella's cell will be going the other way. Let's go."

The scientist led Courtney out of the canopy and towards the cell where Grendella was being held. When they got there, they noticed that she was already sitting by the cell door.

"We won't have long..." Grendella looked nervous. "One of the patrols was wondering about the noises."

"We don't need long." Hubert tugged at the wooden bars of the cage, eventually breaking open a hole wide enough for her to escape. "Come on! I know how we can get out of here fast!"

Ushering Grendella towards one of the darker corridors, he led her down a catwalk while Courtney watched their six. They'd just made it to the lower level of the terrarium when distant shouts could be heard.

"I think they know now..." Grendella's eyes were wide and fearful. "We need to get out of here... and we have to be fast!"

"Let's go then!" Hubert took Grendella by the arm, Courtney grabbed her other arm and the trio ran down the lower level corridor. A shout from above alerted them that they'd been seen.

In a sudden burst of decision, Courtney pushed the other two towards the door.

"Get her out of here, Doctor! I'll handle the Norns!"

Hubert nodded and ushered Grendella through the door, looking back to see his colleague wrestling a Norn with a spear. He winced and quickly stepped through the door, shaking his head.

Once they were in the corridor, the scientist had to pause, his age catching up with him. Before he could consider suggesting that they should take a break, Grendella had already picked him up and thrown him over her shoulder, making a beeline towards the large door that led into the jungle.

The moment the two were inside, the other Grendels were already ushering them back to the communal area, and when Hubert was finally set back on his feet, he collapsed to his knees and took several deep breaths.

Loki wandered over to him, sitting beside him and nudging him. "You were gone a while, Hubert. I was concerned that the Norns had captured you too."

"They almost did." The scientist was still rather breathless, his heart pounding still. Taking a few more breaths, he could speak more normally. "I had to be patient to rescue Grendella. It took my colleague and I some time to map out the best route..."

"Your colleague is not with you. Where is she?"

"She stayed behind to buy us time to escape..." Hubert nudged Loki. "Don't—don't worry about me. Go and spend some time with your mate. I'll be alright..."

Meanwhile, Grendella was being checked over by an older Grendel. Once she'd been cleared, Loki rushed towards her and scooped her up into his massive arms, nuzzling their noses together. Hubert smiled as he watched the scene.

But their moment of peace was soon interrupted. Loki set his mate down just as the other sliding doors opened and Ashra strode in, throwing Courtney down to the jungle floor. She stared at the Grendels, raising her spear up.

"You brutes thought that we wouldn't notice that you teamed up with these *humans*? Well, once we take back our prisoner, we'll ruin you!"

Loki stormed forward, unleashing a loud roar in response. "LEAVE US ALONE!"

From where she'd been tossed, Courtney picked herself up, wincing. Clutching at her side, she stood between Ashra and Loki, grunting in pain.

"Both of you, stop this!" She tried to sound firm, looking to Ashra. "What did the Grendels do to you and your troop?"

"One of them got out and killed a few of our offspring!" Ashra growled as she spoke. "The rest of them would be just as bad!"

"And you!" Courtney turned to Loki, careful not to utter his name in front of the Norn. "What have the Norns done to you and your lounge?"

Loki snarled in Ashra's direction. "Killed offspring. Kidnapped mate. They harm us!"

Hubert stormed up towards the scene, looking between both leaders of their respective species. "All of you should back away and go back to your homes! Now that the Norns' captive is back home, none of you have any business with one another!"

Ashra growled at the scientist. "Are you taking the Grendels' side then?"

"I am not taking sides. You should back away too!" Hubert nudged Loki gently. "Let the Norns return home."

Courtney gave Ashra another look. "Go back to your own territory, Ashra. The Grendels are only agitated because you're on *their* turf. You'd be the same with a Grendel on *your* turf, right?"

For a moment Ashra looked as if she was about to explode with rage. Eventually though, she sighed and took a step back. "I suppose you're right, human." She turned to the members of her troop that had accompanied her. "We're leaving. Let's go."

The moment that the Norns left, the two humans, along with the Grendels, released a collective sigh of relief. Courtney moved to sit down somewhere, still clutching at her side.

"I'm sorry..." Grendella spoke up after a moment of silence, her large ears drooping. "I caused so much trouble for all of us..." Before she could protest further, Loki had already scooped her into his large arms again, cuddling her close.

Hubert smiled at the sight. "It was worth it to make him happy..."

He felt a heavy scaled hand on his shoulder, and when he looked up, he found Mizora looking at him. "You and your colleague should rest now. I imagine your

tussle with the Norns was not easy. I set up a little spot that you and Courtney could rest in."

"Oh, ah... thank you, Mizora. I appreciate it."

Mizora nodded, going over to tell Courtney about the resting spot too. She then led the two humans over to a bed-like area sheltered by large jungle leaves, telling them that they were welcome to rest as long as they liked. Exhausted, Hubert and Courtney flopped onto the cushioned leaves, falling asleep immediately.

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The next day, Hubert awoke surprisingly well-rested. After gathering his pack, he went out to see that Loki and Grendella were still asleep and curled in each other's arms. Smiling, he took a seat on a nearby rock, taking this moment to check over the DNA samples he'd gathered. Thankfully his portable devices had been running batteries of tests while he'd been busy, and now he could read all the insights.

He was so deep into reading the test results that he startled when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry, Hubert." Courtney's still-sleepy yet apologetic voice was soft. "Didn't realise you were busy."

"It's alright." The scientist pointed to the tablet screen he was looking at. "At least while we were busy with our own mission, my tests finished running. And there's a lot of fascinating differences between the genetic markers of Norns and Grendels..."

"Tell me what you found? In layman's terms, of course."

Hubert spent some time discussing his findings with his colleague, looking very thoughtful. It was enough time to give the Grendels time to wake up and get on with their day to day tasks.

It was when he'd finished that he saw the familiar large form of Loki next to him.

"Oh, hello Loki. Don't mind me, I was telling Courtney about what my tests found."

"I see..." Loki nodded slowly. "Will the tests help us find out why Grendella and I are unable to conceive?"

"Oh—!" The scientist had almost forgotten about that. "I believe so. I'd just need to take a DNA sample from her so I can look at the genetic markers. Can you tell

her to come to me, please?"

A grunt of acknowledgement before Loki went to get his mate, telling her to go over to Hubert and reassuring her that the procedure was nothing to concern herself with. Still, once Grendella was over there, she was still very nervous.

"It's alright, Grendella. I won't hurt you." Hubert still explained every step of the procedure as he did it, giving her plenty of encouragement. Once he had the sample, he put it into his device and nodded. "Now... I just have to wait for the DNA to be sequenced so I can compare it to some other samples."

While the samples were processing, Grendella seemed incredibly nervous. She looked to Loki. "If... if the doctor's tests find anything out... you won't... you won't... abandon me, will you?"

Loki hugged her tightly, nuzzling into her hair. "No genetic test could change how I feel about you, Grendella. I just want answers as to why we can never seem to have a child together..."

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It took some hours for the DNA to be sequenced, and then a few more hours for the comparisons. Eventually, the device's beeping alerted Hubert to check on it.

"Hmm?" He looked at the device, checking over the results. In flashing red letters were the words 'GENUS MISMATCH — SPECIES INCOMPATIBLE'.

"What? How can that— I have to run the test again."

Courtney was coming to check on her colleague. "Run the test again? What do you mean?"

"I ran a genetic comparison between Grendella and Loki, but the results say it's a genus mismatch. That can't be right, they're both Grendels."

"Maybe try comparing her DNA with that of one of the other female Grendels?"

Before Hubert could start, Loki wandered over and gave him a look. "How goes your testing?"

"... I need to re-check something. My results were inconclusive. Would you mind if I took a DNA sample from one of the other female Grendels? Perhaps a same-sex sample would yield better results."

"Hm, alright. Let me get Mizora."

The scientist took a sample from Mizora and sequenced it, then he ran the genetic comparison test again.

After several hours passed, his device beeped and the same red text flashed on his screen.

GENUS MISMATCH — SPECIES INCOMPATIBLE

Hubert's shoulders sagged as he clutched the tablet against his chest. He let out a heavy sigh. There were more tests he could run, and he wasn't looking forward to any of them.

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After a moment to gather his thoughts, it was time to deliver the news. Hubert led Loki and Grendella to a quieter area, figuring that it was best to give the news in private.

"So... there's no easy way to say this, but... I have some news regarding why you two are unable to conceive."

Grendella shrank back slightly, her form trembling. Loki tried to reassure her, but he turned to the doctor. "What did you discover?"

"Well... comparing her DNA to both your DNA and Mizora's DNA... there's a genus mismatch."

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

Hubert puffed out a breath. "What it means is... at the DNA level, she's not a Grendel. And the species that she is... it's biologically unable to interbreed with a Grendel, hence why you've been unable to conceive with her."

The news seemed to hit them both like a lead weight. Grendella began to cry quietly. She jumped when Loki stood up, shrinking back when he growled dangerously at Hubert.

"L-Loki, I ran the tests several times—" The scientist shuddered as the large Grendel drew closer, eventually grabbing him by the collar of his shirt and hoisting him off the ground. "Please— Put me down! I-I thought my first test was wrong, that's why I—" He couldn't even finish before he was dropped to the ground like a bag of rocks.

Loki huffed in agitation, leaving and heading back to the main encampment.

After a few moments, Grendella sniffed up, looking towards the scientist.

Hubert returned an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry, Grendella... I..." He sighed, looking at his tablet. The screen had cracked since he'd dropped it in his earlier panic. "I wasn't going to lie to him. I *couldn't*."

"... But then... what am I...?" Her question was barely audible.

Pulling up a few more test results, he simply turned the screen to show her. While none of the graphs and figures would have made sense, she jabbed a clawed finger at the part of the screen that said GENUS MATCH.

"So... this means what...?"

"Ah... well, comparing the DNA samples of you to the other samples I obtained... biologically, you're a Norn, not a Grendel."

"But Loki *hates* Norns... oh, when he finds out... he's... he's going to tear me apart...!" Grendella whimpered, her ears drooping so low that her eyes were almost hidden. "It doesn't matter if he loved me before, he'll *never* love me after this...!"

Hubert could feel his heart break for her. The genetics, unfortunately, did not lie, as much as he wished they could have. He simply pulled Grendella into a gentle hug, patting her head. She hugged him back, sobbing into his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Courtney had seen Loki storming off to the opposite end of the jungle. Despite how angry and intimidating he looked, something in his eyes told her that it wasn't just rage there. She followed him cautiously, pausing a little way away.

"Loki? What... what's wrong?"

"Everything." Loki hissed in response, not even turning to face her.

"I... I presume that Dr. Quaid gave you the answers you were looking for." Her voice tremored slightly.

Silence fell like a heavy curtain. Loki paced back and forth, still not meeting Courtney's gaze.

"I'm guessing it wasn't the result you wanted." She sighed, her body twitching. She was torn between going forward to comfort Loki or move back to give him space.

"... Different species." There was a palpable anger within Loki's tone, though it was tinged with melancholy. "A different species! It doesn't— It makes no sense!" He picked up a rock, hurling it at a nearby tree with an anguished roar. "The doctor you came with must be lying—! Either that or those Norns got to him and he never told us—!"

"Oh, Loki..." Courtney let out the breath she'd been holding, and against her better judgement she stepped forward to embrace the large Grendel, catching him by surprise. "Dr. Quaid would *never* lie about something as big as this..."



"Then what do I do? Did the doctor say anything to you about his tests?"

"He did run the tests several times... said that he couldn't quite believe that it was a mismatch. He so badly wanted any other result, but genetics are very cut and dry..."

Loki sank to the floor, inadvertently pulling Courtney with him. He stared up at the artificial sky, shaking his head.

For a while, neither of them said anything. Then, Courtney sat up a little, carefully petting the Grendel's big scaly cheek. "Hey... I need to grab a bite to eat. You want anything?"

"No, thank you."

The woman nodded, standing up and turning so she could walk back.

"Wait— Courtney."

"Hmm?" She glanced over her shoulder.

"... Tell Dr. Quaid that I needed some time to think things over. I'll hear him out fully later."

"Okay. Take care."

~ ~ ~

After everyone had took some time to calm down, Dr. Quaid had finally been able to give Loki the full story on why he and Grendella couldn't conceive. While it was still a huge blow to him, he'd tried his best to remain calm throughout.

Hubert swallowed the lump in his throat. "I'm... sorry that you had to find out this way, Loki. But science and genetics don't lie."

"But *why*—?!" Loki felt himself becoming agitated again. "Was this all a ploy from those brutish Norns to break me—?! Did they KNOW?!"

"I doubt it, somehow... when I found her captured, they definitely saw her as a Grendel due to her outward appearance. Still... throughout my time here, I think I've figured out *why* this happened."

Loki's crimson eyes seemed to stare right into the scientist's soul. "Tell me."

"When Courtney and I first arrived on board this ship, we docked near the engineering deck. There, we found a machine that called itself a gene splicer. It looks like technology from the Shee. And the way it works is... two creatures go into two separate pods, then the splicer deconstructs them at the molecular level, combining their DNA into a completely new creature."

The Grendel stared in confusion.

"To put it more simply, the splicer breaks down two creatures and combines them into one. There were records on the machine, and the last one was a splice of a Norn and a Grendel. It's highly likely that any splices between Norns and Grendels resulted in Grendella's creation, and the genetic material combined in such a way that gave her the outward appearance of a Grendel, yet she's biologically a Norn."

It took a moment for Loki to understand, but he eventually nodded. "That... that doesn't change how I feel about her. I love her, Dr. Quaid. Even knowing this... I couldn't stop loving her."

Hubert smiled. "I'm glad. *She'll* be glad too. Because she still loves you too despite knowing her genetic truth. At least now you both know why you can't conceive..."

"I suppose we could try this gene splicer—"

The scientist's eyes went wide. "Oh no, absolutely not! You might have missed this at first but the gene splicer works by *completely deconstructing* the creatures in the pods and recombining them into one. Yes, you'd have a child that was both yours *and* hers, but... you wouldn't be able to raise them. And something tells me that you're the sort who would want to raise your children by yourself..."

Loki's ears drooped. He took another few shaky breaths. "... Is there... another means?" He sounded as if he was about to cry. "We've *always* wanted a child that was ours..."

Hubert winced, but he reached out to pat Loki's scaled arm. "I think there might just be a way. I'd just have to do some smaller-scale gene splicing back in my lab, but I think I could create an embryo which we could then implant and allow to grow naturally."

"You'd do that for us?"

"Gladly, Loki. You and Grendella deserve a chance to have the family you've always wanted. And I'm sure my boss will understand how this relates to our overall mission, to network and improve relations among sentient species of the cosmos..." Standing up from where he was seated, he gave the Grendel another pat on the shoulder. "What greater contribution is there than to manifest the purest product of interspecies love?"

The scientist was about to start packing, but he yelped when Loki suddenly picked him up, nearly crushing him in a tight hug.

"Oof— D-Do be careful, Loki— I'm not exactly *young* for the age of my species—"

"You barely knew us, and yet you're doing such kind things... I hardly know what you're talking about sometimes, but know that I appreciate it a lot..." The Grendel set Hubert down, patting his head almost apologetically.

"It might be a while before I return, but you have my word that I will be back. Maybe my revelation will help you and your lounge at least come to a truce with the Norns for now. I'm also going to discuss the possibility of getting everyone off of this ship and onto an actual planet. Stars know that it must be cramped in here..."

~ ~ ~

When Loki had mentioned to the rest of his lounge that Hubert and Courtney would be leaving, a few of the Grendels insisted on a proper send-off. So the humans' last day in the terrarium (for now) was punctuated with food, crude music and a few last words of wisdom.

Before Hubert could leave the terrarium himself, Grendella had stopped him, nearly crushing him in a hug.

"Grendella— As I told Loki, I will be back, just not for a while." He sniffed up. "You're not quite as *aromatic* as the rest of the lounge, I've noticed."

"Just because I look like a Grendel doesn't mean I have to *smell* like one." She seemed to have found a lot more confidence in herself.

The scientist laughed. "I understand. But before I go... there is a question I wanted to ask you. How do you consider yourself? Don't worry about what the genetics say."

"I think... I feel more at home with the Grendels. Especially with Loki. So even if genetics would say otherwise, I see myself as one of the Grendels."

"Alright then. But, Grendella... given that you are a very special Grendel... I feel that you're the best one to help make peace with the Norns. You don't have to forgive them for what they did to you before, but until my team can come back here with a means to give you the child you deserve *and* an actual planet to live on... it might be best to at least try and broker a truce for now."

Grendella nodded, giving the scientist another hug. "Okay. I'll try. Thank you, Dr. Quaid. For everything."

"Of course. You take care now. We'll be back as soon as we can."

~ ~ ~

Once they were back on the spacecraft and on the way back to their headquarters, Courtney put the ship in autopilot and turned to her colleague.

"So... all in all, we found out a lot during our expedition," she said rather thoughtfully, "but we definitely learned that the descriptions of the Shee's creations that we initially received were not that accurate."

"The Grendels, despite their intimidating looks, only seem to want to look out for each other. And the Norns were not as peaceful as we thought." Hubert was looking over his notes and analysis results as he spoke. "Still... once we get back, we can help them. All of them."

"Maybe there's another planet like their old home of Albia out there. Well, we first have to pitch the idea to the boss."

"You should pitch it. He's more likely to say yes to you."

Courtney merely answered with a mirthful giggle as she turned back to the spacecraft controls.