Relativity

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/1131708.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: F/M
Fandom: Thor (Movies)
Relationship: Loki/Sif, Jane Foster/Thor, Clint Barton/Darcy Lewis
Character: Loki (Marvel), Sif (Marvel), Thor (Marvel), Jane Foster (Marvel), Nick Fury, Phil Coulson, Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Original Characters, Original Child Character(s), Thanos (Marvel), The Other (Marvel Cinematic Universe), Peter Quill, Gamora, Mantis (Marvel), Rocket Raccoon, Groot, Drax the Destroyer, Cosmo, Eros | Starfox, Ullr | Ull
Additional Tags: space road trips, SHIELD doing unpleasant things out of necessity
Series: Part 6 of Kingsverse
Stats: Published: 2014-01-12 Updated: 2016-08-26 Chapters: 12/? Words: 97949

Relativity

by nayanroo

Summary

Four years ago, Loki and Sif took the throne of Asgard together, and a new era of cooperation between Asgard and Earth began. Now expecting their first child, the King and Queen prepare for their last trip to Midgard before the arrival of the baby, but their plans are sent awry by the discovery of a secret SHIELD project that threatens to send both realms into open hostilities. But someone has been waiting in the far reaches of space for a chance to seize power, and with two of the most powerful realms in chaos, it's the perfect chance.

Notes

We're back with the sixth installment of Kingsverse! If this is your first foray into this series, I highly suggest you read the other five - there has been significant character development since the beginning, and some plots laid down at the start are going to be picked up here.

I may be starting a class soon - it's the last one I need to be fully qualified for the next step up in my job series and it may eat up a lot of time, but I'll try to update as fast as I can. Luckily there are going to be things in this fic that have been clamoring to be written for a long time, so I'm hoping it'll go soon. As always, questions and comments and requests for explanation are welcome at my tumblr, and I hope you enjoy!
relativity; encompasses two theories created by Albert Einstein, special relativity and general relativity. Briefly, the theory of relativity states that measurements of various quantities are relative to the velocities of observers; that space and time should be considered together and in relation to each other; and that the speed of light is the same for all observers.

general relativity; General relativity generalizes special relativity and Newton's law of universal gravitation, providing a unified description of gravity as a geometric property of space and time, or spacetime. In particular, the curvature of spacetime is directly related to the energy and momentum of whatever matter and radiation are present.
“You summoned me.”

“Yes.”

“It is time, then.”

“For my plans to be put in motion.” He rose, clasping his hands at his back as he stared out into the star-filled void. “Our preparations are complete. We will await further word from our ally to make sure matters in the Nine Realms are as we need them to be, and then we will strike. Make ready your army, and see that our… guest… has his instructions.”

“Of course.” The Other bent his head low as he backed away. When he had reached the stairs, he turned and descended them excitedly. After many long years of waiting in this little corner of space, it was at last time to begin.

*

“It’s time to begin!” Tony spun in his chair. “Are you excited?”

“Busy, Tony.” Jane’s fingers flew across the keys, paused as she watched the screen change to reflect what she’d done, and then stretched across to adjust some of the dials on the board next to her. Black cables snaked from it to various pieces of equipment, all of it humming. “Could you change the base parameters on the thaumatic converter to align with my settings? And Loki—are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” Loki, sitting by a large metal panel with his Kindle propped on his knee, glanced up and replied with a note of irritation in his voice. “As I have been the last three times you have asked.”

“Right. Yes. Sorry. It’s just—“

“Relax, Foster,” Tony said brightly. “I’m sure it’ll work this time.” He made one last adjustment to the panel in front of Loki and got back behind the consoles. “Parameters set. Waiting on you, Doctor.”

Jane took a deep breath, her fingertips resting on the slider on the screen for a heartbeat. “Here goes,” she murmured, and pushed the bars up. The hum of building power filled the air, and Jane pressed her thumb to a dial that appeared on the screen. “Ten percent power and climbing.”

In the center of the room, the black, conical structures arranged around a central platform lit one by one, glowing white. Jane grinned, her thumb still pushing the holographic dial along.

“Fifty percent… sixty… seventy, Loki, now!”

Sparks crackled around his fingertips as Loki placed his palms down on the metal plate. The green light intensified, becoming almost the same blinding white the conductors were putting out, and the optical wires blazed green as they carried his magic around the circle. Jane’s grin widened as the power levels jumped in response, and she quickly input the seven sets of coordinates that would open a stable bridge to Asgard.

“It’s working!” she shouted over the now-deafening roar of power. “One hundred percent power—engaging conductor-transporter link, inputting telemetry information—“
Without warning the buzz of power became an agonized squeal, almost like an animal in pain. White bolts leaped from one conductor to the next as showers of sparks cascaded from the equipment, the accumulated power suddenly left without anywhere to go.

“Down!” Tony shouted and Loki yanked his hands away from the plate to grab Jane and push her to the floor, shielding her with his body until the hum of power subsided into the pops of blowing fuses. Warily he raised his head and both he and Jane peeked up over the console to see a cloud of acrid smoke hanging over the center of the room and showers of sparks bursting out of the conductors.

“Are you all right?” he asked Jane. She nodded, knocked his hand away impatiently when he offered it to help her up, and pulled herself up with the console.

“I don’t—ugh,” she hissed, tapping the screen and narrowing her eyes at the readouts. “Something’s causing interference again, just like the last two times. See this gamma spike here? Whatever’s causing this… it’s like a party line on a telephone…”

“Perhaps you should take some time away from it,” Loki began, but Jane waved her hand at him.

“I’ve got to work on this,” she muttered. “Values… makes no sense…”

Tony leaned over the console. “Better get out now,” he said in a stage whisper. “She’ll be like this for a while.”

“I know, I have been here before…”

“And so I know there’s somewhere else you’d rather be.” Tony jerked his head toward the door. “I’ll cover for you if Princess Brainiac gets cranky. Go on.”

“I heard that!” Jane, now bent over and pulling cables and bits of circuitry out of one of the machines, poked her head out and glared at Tony. Her gaze softened a bit when she turned it on Loki, though. “You can go, though,” she told him. “I’ll need some time to fix this stuff and go over the data to see if I can figure out what the hell’s going on. I’ll let you know, Loki, okay?”

“Generous of you,” Loki quipped, but his smile – at least for Jane – was actually somewhat sincere. She was his sister by marriage, after all, and one of the very few mortals he could tolerate for extended periods of time. “Good luck, Jane Foster.”

With that he pulled the shadows around himself and vanished from the room, reappearing in the watery September sunlight of London. The Einherjar who had been stationed around the Bifrost site stepped smartly to attention and closed around him as he moved to the center of the rune-scribed circle, and the crowds in Kensington Gardens swarmed as close to the barricades as they could, shouting for his attention.

This time, though, Loki ignored them and instead let the Bifrost take him. He had somewhere else to be.

*

The command deck of Fury’s Helicarrier was quiet; it was the night shift, and nothing had cropped up since they’d come on duty. Nobody seemed to be drifting in their attention, though, and everyone sounded alert as they reported in at regular intervals, their voices soft to match the dimmer lighting that ensured preservation of night vision.

“Sir?”
Fury turned as Coulson swiped his fingers across the screen of his tablet; windows slid into view on the console and Fury examined them. “The latest from SWORD, I take it?”

“Yes. It’s… gotten worse, sir. Agent Brand requests updated orders, though she wasn’t as diplomatic as that.”

“She won’t like it, but tell her to hang tight for now.”

“She won’t like that at all.”

“The Project isn’t ready yet, and without it, making any move is just going to show our hand before we’re ready.”

“It’ll be a nightmare for interplanetary relations either way. And on that note…” Coulson flicked his fingers again and another window appeared. “Another incident happened, sir.”

“Are we any closer to figuring out who’s supplying the Asgardian steel that makes these bullets? We’ve been working on this since Latveria. Asgard’s getting antsy.”

“All our leads haven’t gone anywhere, I’m afraid. Asgard’s own investigation has strongly hinted at someone in the palace itself, but they haven’t gotten much more information than we have. The Queen sent me a report on it last week – she regrets not having more time to devote to it. Apparently there have been rebellions across the Nine Realms lately, she’s been putting out fires.”

“Not taking it easy, I guess.”

“She’s Asgardian, I don’t know if she needs to.”

“It might make her husband less touchy.” But Fury shrugged it off; he doubted he’d ever see eye to eye with Loki, but for all that Sif could be as idealistic as Captain Rogers sometimes, she was a born leader. That, he could respect. “How’s he been taking it?”

“Sources say with varying degrees of exasperation. But Dr. Foster’s project keeps him busy.”

“And distracted.”

“Sir… what if he finds out about our Norway installation? About our work there?”

“He can’t. That place is shielded from here to doomsday, there’s no leakage.”

“I’m just asking if there’s a contingency plan. If Asgard learns that we’ve developed…”

“We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it, Coulson. But until then, make sure Hill keeps her team on alert, and call the Captain.”

“Rogers is—“

“The other Captain.”

“Ah. Yes, sir.”

Fury watched as Coulson went over to his console and slipped on a headset. He knew he had the man’s loyalty – among other things – but Coulson had been voicing misgivings about Project Genie since Dr. Foster’s project had really begun gathering steam, and they’d only been building. He wondered if he ought to listen. Coulson’s gut tended to be pretty spot on, and that wasn’t just the attraction talking.
It’s important, vitally important, that we lessen our dependence on Asgard and their Bifrost, the Council members had told him when they’d read over the treaty with the Realm Eternal. We’ll continue to fund Dr. Foster, but we want you to figure out something with no ties whatsoever. Their goodwill isn’t infinite, Director, and we can’t let them know our movements so easily. There’s a limit, and they’re close to crossing it. And for once, Fury had agreed with them.

He called up the two project reports on his tablet and headed to his ready room. The core of SHIELD R&D was redundancy, and he wanted to make sure that both his options were still viable and on schedule.

*

The town of Roda’s Forest in the realm of Vanaheim was a sizeable one; being close to one of the major trade routes leading into the realm’s capitol had expanded its size such that it was almost a city itself, and certainly possessed of many Vanir of reasonable influence and wealth. Goods from the communities for hundreds of miles around funneled through Roda’s Forest, and rural families sent their children to be educated there, and as such it was an important place to control for anyone wishing a tactical advantage in the region.

The gates of the council citadel burst open jut in advance of the group thundering out on their horses. Guards on the walls drew their bows, shooting at the riders; arrowheads plinked off armor (which was made of good Asgardian steel, after all, a product that was scarce in this part of the realm), but most of the archers were aiming for the rider leading the pack, hooded and cloaked. The rider bent low over their horse’s neck, and the dappled gray courser snorted and sprang forward, hooves clattering on the cobblestones of the street.

The leaders of Roda’s Forest were smart, however, and had put guard posts around the city, so that when the riders – a delegation from Asgard attempting to determine the root cause of the city’s decision to rebel against the Vanir leaders – left the shadow of the citadel’s walls, they pulled up short before ranks of the city guard, standing with swords drawn.

“You dare!” yelled one of the horsemen, his curved helm marking him as one of the Einherjar. “You dare bare blades when you know—“

“We no longer recognize Asgard’s authority,” the leader of the guardsmen said. “Dismount and surrender your weapons, and by the council’s word you will be treated fairly and well until you can be ransomed.”

The hooded leader of the riders nudged their mount forward; sensing the mood; the horse laid his ears back as he was drawn up, pawing the stones so that his shoes threw sparks. “You are one city of a realm,” the rider said, lowering her hood. Sunlight gleamed on the wings of the Dragon Crown and seemed caught in black hair that rippled down her back, and Queen Sif stared down at the guards who barred her way. “You do not have the power to deny the right of Asgard to mediate on realms beholden to the throne. Now, lay down your weapons, and I will conveniently forget we had this conversation.”

She said this all in such a confident voice that for a moment, the guardsmen looked between each other, unsure. Queen Sif had done their realm a great service and respected them in a way that certain other rulers of Asgard and the Nine Realms had not; one of her greatest friends was of the Vanir himself, and rumor had it that she had taken as page a Vanir girl. But their orders were clear, and the leader straightened his back.

“You are Queen of Asgard,” he said, “And so you will be well-treated. Now, please, my lady. We do not want to spill your blood.”
Sif could not help it; her lips twitched. Her sword was strapped to her saddle, but she raised her hands, holding them slightly away from her body. Behind her, her guard shifted, the horses snorting.

"You would die before your first stroke fell," she said quietly, and dropped her hands again, and the horsemen at her back sprang into action.

The city guards, alarmed at the sight of Einherjar seemingly charging right at them without caring for their safety, trembled. And that was all the time that was needed, that moment of hesitation. Sif gathered up her reins in one hand – no time for finesse – and bellowed "Now!" over the racket. With amazing precision the riders split, sending their mounts as fast as they dared down the narrow alleys between walled merchant estates.

There was barely enough room for two abreast, but they soon emerged into another large thoroughfare and turned back toward the main city gates and the shortest route to where they could safely be transported home. Heimdall had certainly enough precision to pluck a traveler up with the Bifrost anywhere, but when it came to horses and riders, it was simply easier to do it in an open space.

Of course, this was when the cannons mounted on the walls of the citadel started firing. Sif frowned at this, but spun Gylfi on his hindquarters and made for the city gates as fast as she could.

*I told them to be swift,* she thought, a spike of worry in her heart. *We may not make it out if they are not.*

* * *

"Not to be a spoilsport, but if we do not hurry—"

"You’ll wither away from lack of feeding? I very much doubt that, my vast friend."

"I was going to say that our dear Queen will have gotten herself into trouble, because these cannons have quite a range and one that can easily reach the Bifrost site besides, and, well…"

"I jest, old friend, I knew what you were talking about. Now…"

Fandral, his hand on the hilt of his rapier, peered up the winding staircase. From above, great deep booms shook the steps every time the cannon fired… and it was firing off a lot of shots. Beside him, Volstagg adjusted his grip on his axe. Fandral turned back to him with a grin.

"Now all we have to do is wait for Hogun’s—"

The body of one of the guards came clattering down the stairs from the cannon platform, and Fandral and Volstagg pressed themselves back against the wall as it bounced down, coming to rest against the wall.

"—sign," Fandral finished. "I suppose—"

Hogun stuck his head around the bend in the staircase. His expression didn’t change much, but there was a definite look of what’s keeping you in his eyes as he jerked his head back up the stairs. Without further ado, the other two of the Warriors Three swept up onto the cannon platform behind their friend, and between Fandral’s rapier, Volstagg’s mighty axe, and Hogun’s deft work with his mace, the city guardsmen who had been manning the weapons were all dead or unconscious in a trice.

Hogun bent to tie up the ones who had only been rendered unconscious as Fandral peered at the
controls of one of the cannon. “It’s not dissimilar to the ones at home,” he said brightly. “What say we help out our gracious Queen, eh?”

He climbed up into the seat and laid his hands upon the controls, grinning the whole time. Volstagg shaded his eyes with a hand as he watched.

“Do you have any idea what you are doing, Fandral?”

“No at all! But it seems like a good and helpful idea, right, Hogun? See, he’s silent, Volstagg, silence means yes.”

“It does not.”

“He speaks and it’s not favorable to you, Fandral. Shouldn’t you get down—“

“Probably, but I’m not going to. Now, how do I get it to fire?”

* 

Sif yanked Gylfi’s reins hard to the left, avoiding another volley of arrows from archers on the rooftops nearby, only to run right into a shower of dust and shattered stone from the house exploding beside them. The cannon fire was coming fast and hard, and Sif cast a glare over her shoulder as the guards with her pulled in close, raising their shields to protect her.

“What are they doing?” she muttered, then heeled Gylfi forward. Fearlessly he galloped onward, and her guard kept up with her as best they could. Houses seemed to burst to either side of them as the city guards in the emplacements fired more and more recklessly, and Sif ground her teeth that the innocent people in this city were being made to suffer for the sudden idiocy of their leaders. She did her best to maneuver around them, and for their part when they saw her coming at them fast, crowned and with a determined look upon her face, they got out of the way.

“My lady!” one of the Einherjar shouted. “The cannons, they’ve stopped!”

Sif turned her attention from plowing through a group of the city guard to look back at the now-quiet cannon emplacements. She could just barely see two people waving frantically at her, and grinned.

“They’ve done it!” she said. “Make for the—“

A glowing ball of energy went whizzing overhead and Sif ducked, watching it go bowling into an oncoming group of city guardsmen.

“—gates,” she finished. “Oh, I am going to have words with Fandral when we return home…”

She pushed Gylfi across the scorch mark left by the cannon fire and led her group of Einherjar through back onto the main road out of Roda’s Forest. Shortly after, she was joined by the other group, the part that had split off. The gatekeepers, perhaps, had wised up and the gates stood open before them. Hoofbeats sounded rapid and hollow over the bridge over the city’s canal and then they were out, their horses covering the grassy ground easily and quickly.

When they reached the Bifrost site Sif called for the Captain of the Einherjar who had come with her. “Task some men with waiting for the Warriors Three here,” she told him. “Make sure they know I will want to speak with them when they return to Asgard.”

“Yes, my Queen.” The Captain fidgeted a bit. “My lady, I must ask…”
“I am quite well, Captain.” Sif straightened, repressing a sigh. “Your concern is appreciated, but I think it will take somewhat more to stop me from doing my duty.”

Sensing he had perhaps toed a line he was not meant to cross, the Captain quickly bowed his head. “Of course, my Queen,” he said respectfully, then turned away to give his orders.

Five minutes later, Sif led them into the column of the Bifrost.

* 

“Are you still playing with that stuff?”

Bruce pushed the holographic projection down so he could look at Tony over the top of it. Years on and he still hadn’t figured out what it was about the mysterious black rock that made it block not only Loki’s innate magic, but any magic. They’d tested it with artifacts from Asgard, SHIELD had apparently tested it with other people who had relevant abilities, and nothing - nothing - got past it.

“It’s still a mystery,” he replied. “There’s nothing in its molecular structure that indicates why it does what it does, all our chemical tests don’t indicate anything particularly special… there’s nothing to explain its effects in our current scientific knowledge.”

“So what about outside of it?”

“Tony,” Bruce said patiently, “The point of defining ‘current scientific knowledge’ is to say that there is literally nothing in our realm of understanding that I have not tried to use. But if there’s a way to determine it, it’s not anything that we, on Earth, know or understand.”

“Yet.”

“You.” Bruce ran his hands through his hair. “And we’re no closer to figuring out what Doom’s been doing with optics-grade glass.”

Though Doom wasn’t their responsibility (another group who had been dealing with the antics of Latveria’s ruler and who was not also banned from crossing its borders had taken over) they had received samples now and then of more glassine material that all turned out to be the same as before. They were absolutely no closer to figuring out what that was all about either.

“Maybe he’s trying to make a mirror that will show him how beautiful he is inside.” Tony threw his hands up. “At least whatever he’s trying, he’s still unsuccessful.”

“Small comforts.” Bruce watched as Tony spun around to his console, running a newly-programmed decryption. He’d come up with it in conjunction with some previously very bored MIT grad students, who were no longer bored as they all had paid internships at Stark Industries’ R&D division. They’d wormed their way deep down into SHIELD’s files that Tony insisted on pilfering every so often, and there was some pretty exciting encryption going on. According to Tony, anyway. Bruce wasn’t a programmer or an engineer or a thrill-seeker, just a scientist with a sense of adventure. “Still messing with that?”

“I like knowing what SHIELD is up to.” Tony fiddled with some of the settings. “Don’t you? They just brushed off what we told them about the Tesseract-like emissions from that ‘bot in San Francisco, that’s not normal.”

“To be fair, we weren’t exactly honest ourselves.”

“Still.” Tony watched the decryption program humming away to itself. “We’re supposed to be top tier with them. I don’t appreciate being used and misled.”
“Neither do I. And I only say anything because you’ve been playing with it for years and it’s hilarious how determined you are.”

“I’m a persistent man. How else do you think I got Pepper to agree to go out with me?”

“When you put it that way it sounds like you’re in high school.”

“Well, she’s like the popular, smart girl in the class and I’m the troubled, troublemaking genius.”

They continued to shoot lines back and forth, though they both turned to other projects. This was part of why Bruce had stayed, though; it all made him feel relaxed, accepted, and in his position that was huge.

It wasn’t until Tony failed to respond to one of his little barbs that Bruce looked up from manipulating the holographic structure of the black rock to try and figure out something new about it.

“I didn’t actually mean it, you know,” he said. “I don’t think you’re a—“

“Anyone at SHIELD ever mentioned a Project Genie to you?”

Tony’s voice was strange, tight and controlled under the casual veneer. Bruce straightened, waving his hand to shut down all the analysis he’d been doing. “No. Why?”

“Come take a look at this.”

Five minutes later, Bruce was leaning against the lab bench. All the calm was gone from before; his heart raced his mind for speed, his palms felt sweaty.

“So,” he said. “Now we know.”

“Yeah.” Tony passed a hand over his mouth, staring at the screen, at the damning words on it. “You realize this explains a lot.”

“Yeah.” Bruce pulled off his glasses and pinched his nose. “Yeah, it really does.”

“So what are we going to do about it?”

Bruce hauled his brain off the edge of a very dangerous rage and, quietly, outlined his plan. When he was done, Tony was grinning. He was angry, but he was smiling, and Bruce knew better than anyone that anger with a purpose was far healthier and less destructive to oneself or in general.

“You,” Tony said, “Are a genius.”

“Highest praise, coming from you.” Bruce pulled out his phone and tapped one very specific contact. “Let’s get started.”

*  

The hum of the Bifrost was still loud in his ears as he crossed the gleaming floor toward the archway. The outer shell had already spun down, and beyond it he could see his gun-ship waiting for him, draped in green and gold cloth. In the same way as Sif lovingly cared for her weapons or her horses or her motorcycle, Loki had cared for this gun-ship. He’d made certain special enhancements himself, adding more when he’d learned of his impending fatherhood. But mostly it was built for speed, maneuverability, and giving anyone opposing him in it a powerful headache.

“No horses?” he asked Heimdall as he passed.
“I thought perhaps my King would like to get back to the palace quickly.”

There was a note of amusement in Heimdall’s eyes that made Loki pause half a step, but he paid it no mind and continued on, climbing into his gun-ship and taking the tiller in hand.

“I would sit down if I were you,” he told his guards. Very wisely, they complied, and with a grin, Loki gripped the tiller tightly, fingertips coming down along the outer edge. Engines whining, the gun-ship rose and shot off at speeds strictly faster than necessary, the light of Asgard’s sun glittering off its gold-painted designs.

Heimdall had not been wrong. For all that he did love traveling this way, and had taken the gun-ship out for loops of the city when he grew bored, he had been away from Asgard for nearly a week this time, and there was someone he very much wanted to see.

He landed smoothly on the wide platform atop one of the towers of the palace, fingers easing off the speed and slowly releasing the tiller, letting it settle into its landing position before springing lightly to the ground. The guards seemed a little shaky as they stepped off, but said nothing of it. Brave souls, they were, or else just very smart, and Loki was not unaware of the fact that it had become common knowledge that one simply didn’t annoy him too much if they wanted to keep their position.

“My King,” one of his attendants said, “Welcome home. Was your trip to Midgard productive?”

“Not at all.” He opened his mouth to ask where Sif was, but the attendant barreled on ahead.

“We have had a messenger from Jotunheim, my King, with an update on their ongoing succession crisis…”

“Did they not agree to keep Urrikr on the throne?”

“There seems to be some dispute. If I may, my lord, Asgard should—“

“Wait for an afternoon while I make sure my wife has fared well in my absence.” Loki’s eyes narrowed when he saw how the attendant paled and hustled along faster in his wake.

“But my King, the Vanir—“

The attendant stuttered to a halt as Loki spun to face him, holding up a palm to forestall any verbal protests or statements. “Algeyr,” he said. “It is Algeyr, yes? I have been away from Asgard for nearly a full week attempting to understand why a process that ought to work perfectly refuses to do so. I have a pregnant wife I would very much like to see. Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

“My King, it is about your lady wife.”

Ice flooded him, and he looked back. The attendant visibly shook in his robes as Loki spoke, his voice very soft, so quiet it did not even echo in the great hall.

“What about the Queen?”

“She… the talks with that rebel faction in Vanahem, my lord, the one in Roda’s Forest, they were not going well, so she went with some of the Royal Guard and the Warriors Three to lend her weight to them…”

Loki closed his eyes, breathing slowly through his nose until the panic was manageable. It was probably nothing, after all, for he would have known if something truly horrible had befallen Sif long before now.
“Where is she now?”

“In the Healing Room, my lord. She was not hurt herself, but many of the Guard were, and she is seeing to their care.”

“Of course she is.” Loki pulled the shadows around him – doubtless giving Algeyr the attendant a horrible fright, followed by utter relief – and reappeared in the broad entrance hall of the Healing Rooms, giving the junior healers and apprentices there horrible frights. In the midst of the resulting chaos, Loki pulled one of the master healers aside and asked, in what he thought of as a very calm manner, where his wife was.

He must have been more forceful or terrifying than he thought, for the man’s eyes widened slightly. “I… follow me, my King, she is overseeing… just back here, please.”

Sif had a hand pressed into her back as she watched one of the healers help a member of the special Royal Guard contingent of Einherjar back up to his feet. The two of them watched the guardsman walk back and forth with a critical eye, the healer wiping her hands on her apron. The motion quickly became a curtsy when she realized Loki stood in the archway, and all the Royal Guard came as close to attention as they could.

Only Sif remained relaxed, looking around at her guards. “At ease,” she said, her voice clear and ringing in the space, and there was almost an audible sigh of relief from some who promptly slumped back onto their pillows. “Welcome home, husband.”

“And the same to you, dearest wife,” Loki replied, letting just a bit of the edge through. He could see her straighten, her chin tilting up proudly.

“Master Healer Eyfura, will you need me for anything else?”

“No, my Queen.” Eyfura was nervous, but her voice was clear and strong. “My staff and I can see to the rest. Thank you for your assistance.”

“It was no trouble. Let me know if there is anything else.”

Everyone inclined their heads as Sif and Loki left the room, and those they passed in the bright halls did the same. Sif occasionally paused to touch a Guard’s hand or murmur encouragement, but she seemed to know that they needed a private talk and kept it blissfully short.

Loki waited until they were out of the Healing Room and on their way back to the residential wing before he spoke. “I thought,” he said, “That you had agreed to remain behind and let the delegation do its work.”

“I had, and if the negotiations had been going any better I would have indeed left it to the delegates to carry out. But they were encountering far more resistance than they could handle, and I thought it best to intervene. As well I did, husband. By the time I reached Roda’s Forest, the delegates had been killed.”

“Did you not think that yours would be a valuable death? Queen of Asgard and the Nine Realms, killed by rebels—“

“Do you believe me stupid? Of course I thought about it. That was why I took so many Guardsmen with me.” Her fingers brushed her stomach, a gentle curve under the dark red suede of her tunic. “I know I cannot fight as I did even two months ago, and I was not going to put myself or our child in danger if I did not think I could get out.”
“You could have sent word to me, at least.”

“And you would have come haring back to Asgard, and whoever is passing information to these rebels from the palace would have known something was wrong.” She looked at him sidelong. “Don’t pretend I’m not right.”

“You are,” Loki grumbled after a moment of sullen silence. “But if something had happened to you…”

“Nothing happened, and both I and the babe are perfectly all right.” Sif pulled them both to a stop and took his hands, placing them on her stomach where he might feel her strong heartbeat, and with it, the heartbeat of their child. “I know you worry for us, but really, Loki, I am in fact capable of taking care of things and being pregnant at the same time.”

The corridor they were in was deserted, and so he felt safe stepping forward, resting his forehead against hers. “I know,” he said, “But I… Sif, I could not bear it if I lost you both, and if I cannot protect you—”

“—then I will simply have to protect myself,” Sif finished for him sharply. “A shocking prospect, I know, but one that I find very simple in practice.”

Loki could not say anything, could only press his face against her hair and reassure himself that she was all right and be grateful she allowed him to do this, to be weak without fear of it being used against him. Sif put her arms around him and pressed in as close as she could, her fingers stroking his hair.

“In any case,” she said when they’d pulled apart and continued on their way, her arm linked through his, “I worry more for you surviving this pregnancy than myself. After all, women have been having their babes in fields for thousands of years before you or I were glimmers in the eyes of our parents, but I am not entirely sure anyone has been as utterly neurotic about colors of food as you are.”

He was certain she had said other words, but the only thing Loki heard out of all that made him pause. “You want to have the baby in a field?”

Sif threw up her hands.

*

“It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Thor set a mug of coffee down at Jane’s elbow. With one of her hands fisted in his close-woven tunic, Lena grinned and reached for her mother.

“Mommy!”

Jane looked up suddenly from her tablet, and Thor felt a great warmth in his chest when a smile just the same as their daughter’s blossomed across his wife’s face. Jane had been so preoccupied with her work since the failed test yesterday that he feared she’d forget everything else around her, but he should have known better. Lena was their little light.

“Hi there, little lady,” she said, taking Lena from Thor’s arms. “You been keeping an eye on your dad?”

“Yes, Mommy. Daddy been good.”
“That’s good. I’m glad I can count on you to keep him out of trouble.” She stretched up to kiss Thor and he relished it, his hand stroking her hair before resting on her back.

“Someone must do it,” he rumbled. Jane leaned against him a little bit.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed, letting Lena down so she could go tearing off across the flat. Greenwich had only been too happy to provide more funding and more facilities when Jane had come asking. After all, one of the youngest Nobel laureates had a lot of pull when it came to alumni and applications, and it didn’t hurt that the more Jane was here, the more Thor was around. But Jane had been in the lab every day, and not even Loki had escaped her grasp; Thor had barely had half a day with his brother before Jane had hauled him off. Luckily, both his brother and Sif were due to make their last diplomatic visit before Sif curtailed her travel, and Jane had agreed to take a break from her research so they could have some time together.

“I know I’ve been busy lately,” Jane was saying as they followed their daughter into the living room. “It’s just extremely frustrating that everything that should work doesn’t, and I can’t figure out why, or what’s causing this gamma spike.”

“Perhaps it is time to let it go for a while. Come, Jane, I’ve made us lunch.”

She tilted her head up to peer at him. “You made lunch.”

“I’ve been learning! I’m much better than I was.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Thor scooped up her hand and kissed it. “You will believe me when you taste it.”

Jane grinned up at him before slipping away to help Lena up into her booster seat. Thor hesitated in the doorway, watching them together; Jane’s hair shining in the light, Lena chattering away. He loved to see his wife excited about her work, but sometimes he was as jealous of that as he was resentful of the fact that Midgard could so easily pull him away from them with its conflict. It all ate into the years he had left with Jane, each one seeming to slip away faster than the one before.

“And then Darcy taked us—“

“Took us, sweetie.”

“Tooked us—“

“Close enough.” Jane surveyed the dishes on the table. “Chicken noodle soup and… Pop-Tarts. Interesting.”

“She likes them both. Don’t you, little one?”

“Yes, Papa. I like them both!”

“See, Jane?” Thor watched as Lena broke off a piece of Pop-Tart and crammed it in her mouth. “She likes them.”

“She needs to eat her—Lena, the soup first. Lena! The soup!”

They ate lunch in happy conversation. As language had come to her, Lena had become garrulous, commenting on anything and everything. She had Jane’s curiosity… but then again he should have known that when he’d found Lena working out how to get out of her crib, or how to defeat child-
proof gates and cabinet locks and many other things she ought not have been getting in to.

Later, Thor came wandering into the den after putting Lena to bed. As energetic as she was, she luckily went to sleep easily. As much as he loved his daughter Thor appreciated the time he got alone with Jane. She was reading on the couch, but glanced up and smiled at him as he sat beside her.

“She’s out?”

Thor twitched the end of the blanket over and Jane draped her legs across his lap. He arranged the blanket around them. “She asked for the tale of Thrym again before bedtime.”

“I knew we shouldn’t have let your brother babysit her.” Jane set her book aside and leaned forward, wrapping her arms around her knees and resting her head on Thor’s shoulder. “He’s a bad influence.”

“Perhaps. But she can hardly escape it.”

Jane hummed thoughtfully and quieted, and after a while Thor put an arm around her and rested his cheek upon her head, content to simply sit there with her warm, comfortable weight leaning against him. She was so rarely still as of late, it was as though she needed to manifest her passion for her work through movement, but there had been plenty of time lately for them to have these quiet moments. In a few hours there would be nightmares and little toddler hands grasping the bedsheets, but for now it was only Jane and Thor, and he relished it.

“I enjoy this,” he said, pressing his lips to her hair. Jane hummed, and he felt her lips on his throat.

“Me too. Lena’s got your energy—“

“I think we share responsibility for that, my love.”

“Yeah, I guess we do.” Jane shifted and got more comfortable against him. “Still, I think she takes after you in some really important ways. She fell down the steps down to the sidewalk the other day and bounced.”

Thor snorted. “Resilience can be very uniquely Asgardian.”

“Hmm, you’re talking to someone who persisted with a theory that got her laughed out of two universities…”

“And look where that got you.”

He could feel Jane’s grin against his skin. “Pretty far in life, I’d say.”

She got quiet after that, and they sat in companionable silence, letting time slip by. He thought she’d fallen asleep on him – and to be honest, Thor was prepared to sit up all night just so he could hold her like this – but about an hour after he’d sat down, she jerked a little and sat up.

“I’ve figured it out,” she breathed.

“What?”

Jane threw the blanket off and scrambled off him. “The problem! The reason why every attempt has been unsuccessful, the interference—what time is it in the States? I’ve got to call...”

Thor sighed, but felt a surge of excitement to mirror what was on his wife’s face. If it meant the stress she’d been under would go away, he would be happy for her discovery. “What is it?”
Jane grinned. “For once, Thor,” she said. “I can explain this in terms you’ve grown up with. Oh, Stark’s going to hate that.”

“Jane?”

She clicked over to Skype on her laptop and sat down, running her hand through her hair a few times. “It’s about the Tesseract.”

* 

The next day saw Loki walking into Fensalir, his mother’s hall. She still took petitioners, so unsurprisingly, he came face to face with a group from the city just on their way out. They had all bowed and given him and Sif their best wishes for a healthy child, they left and he was able to proceed out onto the patio where his mother sat on a cushioned stool, putting away her spindle. Not only mother of the reigning monarch but a beloved woman in her own right, Frigga often still saw petitioners and did what she could to aid them. Lately he had been going to her as well, asking for advice about Sif and pregnancy and child-rearing and all that came with it. He had been somewhat relieved to find out that Sif often did the same.

His mother stood and took his hands, and Loki suffered himself to bend over so she could kiss him on both cheeks. “You look well, Mother,” he said quietly.

“Thank you, dear.” She leaned back, eyeing him critically. “I am going to send for some tea, you have a look about you.”

“Mother…”

“Tea is a treatment for many ills, Loki, and worry is one of them. Walk with your old mother until it comes, won’t you?”

She gave instructions to one of her handmaidens and then took her son’s offered arm. It was pleasant in the gardens; a breeze blew off the rim sea, and as they walked he let his formal court garb melt away, replaced by more casual gear.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Frigga murmured gently, though her lips were tilted up. “It baffles people.”

“I like them better that way.”

“Four years as King has done nothing to dull your taste for such things.” She paused, leaning over to smell one of the blooms on a rosebush.

“Did you expect it might?”

“Not at all.” His mother straightened and tucked her hand in his elbow again. “Now, what is it you wanted to talk to me about? If it is about Sif again, she came to me yesterday and we have ascertained, using a considerable amount of my many thousands of years of knowledge, that she and the child are both perfectly safe and healthy.”

“I—yes, that is good.” Loki pursed his lips. “Have I become that obvious?”

“I am your mother, Loki, I know you better than most. But really, as endearing as your concern is, you must remember to trust Sif. She is perhaps even more fiercely protective now that she is with child than she was before, and should anyone threaten her or the babe they will have another thing coming if they think she will present less of a challenge.”
“I know, Mother.”

“No that you should not be concerned at all.” She leaned over again, this time touching the petals of a star-flower. “But try not to dog her footsteps too much. She is just as nervous as you are… but you knew that, of course.”

Loki walked along in his mother’s wake for a while, watching her smell her blooms, prune away dead or dying branches with a tiny silver knife she kept for the purpose. Occasionally she asked his opinion or requested aid, but for the most part she let him follow along just as he had as a child and an adolescent and even after he’d reached majority. Here he was not a King, just a son and a husband and soon, a father.

It was that last that he fretted over the most. It had been one of the sticking points years ago, when he and Sif had really sat down to talk about the prospect of children. Loki felt he had not exactly had the most shining example of fatherhood in his life, and after circling round and round this a few times Sif had thrown her hands in the air and said that he need not follow in Odin’s parenting footsteps, and she would in fact prefer that he do anything but.

This still left him in a state of confusion. Any child of himself and Sif would inevitably be strong-willed, talented, brilliant, possessed of a number of potential gifts, one of the first children of two realms born in almost a thousand years… what if he did not nurture them properly? What if he created another person who was like the man he had been—was still fighting to get away from?

“I can all but hear you thinking, dear.”

Loki sighed, passing a hand over his face as they walked back to the patio for their tea. Frigga poured it for them, deftly keeping her sleeves out of the way. “Another one of my known traits.”

And he told her of his thoughts, his tea growing cold as he did. When he finished he took a sip, grimaced, and pushed a bit of his magic through it to warm it again. His mother watched him, one of her little enigmatic smiles playing about her mouth as she did. Loki knew that expression very well, for it was one he wore often.

“My dear, lovely son,” Frigga murmured, reaching across to rest her hand on his. “You will be a wonderful father. I wish there were easy things I could teach you, as I did so long ago when you were learning your powers… alas, parenting is a magic of an altogether different sort, and its mysteries are not contained within any tome or scroll in any library in the Nine Realms or beyond them. It is the sort of thing one must learn for oneself. And you are a very smart man, Loki, and a good King, and you will be a good father as well, in the same way that Sif is a brilliant warrior and a wonderful Queen and will likely be a better mother than I was—“

“Nobody will be a better mother than you,” Loki cut in, and Frigga beamed at him.

“Trust Sif, and trust yourself,” she told him, letting go of his hand. “I am so very proud of both of you.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

They finished their tea and he rose to leave, kissed Frigga on both cheeks this time, and went for the door.

“Oh, Loki? Do try not to put much stock in some of those things the mortal Tony Stark sends you to read, dear. They’re dreadfully inaccurate.”

Loki froze. “How…”
“Sif was in fine form earlier, quite upset about your obsession with her eating habits. I assure you, we are working with the kitchens to ensure she gets the nutrition she needs, and you needn’t concern yourself with that.”

He swallowed. His mother’s words had carried no tone of rebuke, but he felt the same as he had as a child when he’d been caught in some bit of mischief. Back when he had still been able to be caught.

“Yes, Mother,” he replied, and left the room.

* 

Lena actually slept longer than she usually did, which was just as well. Thor made coffee and sat down to watch Jane pacing back and forth across the room designated as her office.

She was talking quickly to the computer – he had ducked in briefly to say hello to Tony and Bruce, and to say that his time here was very nice and that London was quite lovely but that he’d be ready for duty again in a few weeks when his leave time ended – explaining her idea, which as far as Thor could tell involved the Tesseract interfering with her Earth-based Bifrost system. He’d tried explaining that the Tesseract was not only dormant after being drained four years ago, it was shielded by a variety of spells of both Loki’s and their mother’s devising, and even if Loki had left himself a loophole, Frigga would not have done. But Jane was determined, and it was best to get out of her way when she was like this, so Thor sipped his coffee and leaned back against the couch, closing his eyes and waiting for Jane to finish up.

“Wait, what?”

He cracked an eye open. Jane was standing silhouetted in the doorway, staring at her computer. She looked confused, her mouth slightly open and her brows drawn down and together. Bruce said something that Thor couldn’t quite hear, and Jane’s expression changed, becoming more angry than confused, and she stalked over to her computer, out of sight.

“What did you say, Dr. Banner?”

Thor got up and went to lean in the doorway. Jane mostly obscured the screen that showed Tony and Bruce seated in one of the labs in Stark Tower, while in a smaller window what looked like some kind of document appeared. The SHIELD logo was bold in the upper left corner, and Thor stepped around the doorway to see what was going on.

“Hey again,” Bruce said. “You should probably see this too, Thor. It’s your people that SHIELD’s been lying to as well as us.”

“We’ve all kind of agreed that you’ll be the one to tell your brother and Sif, though,” Tony added. “Whatever abuse they team up to hurl, you can probably take. I mean, you’ll at least survive.”

“I do not understand,” Thor said, coming to lean on the desk beside Jane. He brushed his fingers over her knuckles and she took his hand for a brief squeeze, her anger taking second place to a fond look before she turned back to look at the other two again. “What is the matter?”

“Read that little memo, Hammertime,” Tony said. So Thor did.

And then he read it again, because he was certain that he was misunderstanding something in the language, some nuance of English that the Allspeak didn’t catch.

And then he read it a third time, but by then he knew what he was seeing and, much like Jane, confusion was giving way to anger.
“They lied,” he growled. “To us, to the rest of the Avengers, to my brother and Sif and Asgard…”

“That’s what’s been causing your interference,” Tony said. “Dr. Foster, it’s not cosmic at all. It’s right here on Earth, it’s in Harstad. Project Genie.”

“Those bastards,” Jane breathed, and though he too was angry, Thor was startled to hear so much venom in her tone of voice. She clicked a few times and more documents appeared, each one more damning than the last. “They’ve been screwing up my work because they don’t think it’ll yield results as quickly—“

“They are meddling in things far beyond them,” Thor added. “So, friends, Jane—what do we do?”

“First things first,” Tony said. “We tell Asgard. How do you think they’re gonna take it?”

* *

“In here, my lady.”

The guard opened the door for her and put his fist over his heart as she passed. The hall was empty save for Loki and a messenger, who looked extremely uncomfortable.

“What is going on?” she asked. “Loki?”

She could see the anger writ plain on his face when she came closer, and that was enough to slow her steps. For Loki to be so plain-faced…

He didn’t greet her or look around at her, only pointed at the messenger. “Again. Repeat what you have told me to your Queen.”

“As you wish, my King.” When he turned to face her and bowed, Sif made a note to personally commend him; he was quite obviously aware of the gravity of the message he carried, terrified to be confronted by his rulers, one of which was livid and would probably soon be followed to that state by the second, but he did not waver and his voice did not crack or sound thin.

“My Queen, we have received word from Midgard, from the Avengers, friends to the throne and the House of Odin, and from the Lady Jane, Princess of—“

“Yes, yes,” Loki waved a hand irritably. “Get on with it. We know everyone this message is from.”

“…very well, my King. The Midgardians of SHIELD have constructed a Tesseract of their own, hidden away in a kingdom of the north. Its effects have been causing problems for the Lady Jane’s work, and she requests your aid and support in this matter.”

Sif stared at the messenger a moment, trying to determine if he might be lying. Judging by Loki’s reaction, she thought that he had probably been put through her husband’s own ways of determining honesty, and resolved to have this messenger commended for bravery, if only because she was starting to feel hot rage bubbling up in her as well.

“Thank you,” she said quietly to the messenger. “The King and I will discuss this and send you back to Midgard with our reply. Please wait outside.”

The messenger made his manners and left the hall with alacrity, the door shutting with a very final-sounding thud. Sif felt her child shift within her, and then a sharp kick. She winced, stroking the spot. “I know,” she murmured.
That seemed to get Loki to step back from his anger for a moment. “The child?”

“Just as angry at this betrayal as we are. So, is it time to start our last trip to Midgard rather earlier than planned, and pay SHIELD a visit?”

“Yes,” Loki said slowly. “Yes, I think that is a most appropriate idea, dear wife.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”
Aphelion

Chapter Notes

Well... that was quick!

Like I said, I might be starting a class soon, so don't expect all updates to be so quick. I'll do my best but I can only work as fast as other stuff in my life allows. I'll plug away at it though, because things are about to get really exciting!

aphelion; the point of greatest distance in a body's elliptic orbit of the Sun.

Darcy spun back and forth in her chair, staring at the ceiling as she listened to the official from South Africa talk. Could have been a professor, she thought. Tenure track, condo, maybe a girlfriend or a boyfriend or a cat. At least I’ve got the cat.

“The King and Queen have made their position clear,” she said when the man had finished speaking. “I’m sorry, but unless you have something better to offer, you won’t get a trade agreement. Yes, if you get something together, I’ll make sure they see it when they’re here next month and I’ll certainly relay their opinion. No, thank you, I look forward to hearing from you again, sir. Have a good evening.”

She hung up the phone and leaned back, closing her eyes for a moment before she reached for her laptop and fired off another email to the poor soul charged with managing public appearances and schedules for Sif and Loki while they were on-planet. That woman deserved some kind of distinguished service award for how she managed to remain unruffled in the face of the fact that all the Asgardians seemed to think it was hilarious that they had hordes of screaming fans and liked to dawdle with them when they got the chance. Still, Lisa was more than capable of making sure that any proposal from South Africa would be put under the noses of her esteemed rulers, and after visiting the country herself, Darcy had a soft spot. It might have only been a two-day pit stop on the way to a location even she hadn’t been allowed to know the true coordinates of, but it had made an impression.

The doors to her office opened, and Darcy bit her lip. The country hadn’t been the only thing to make an impression on that trip, and though she’d enjoyed it – oh, had she ever enjoyed it – she wished she hadn’t done it sometimes, because now that impression was standing in front of her desk, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

“Need something, Barton?” she asked, and quietly thanked whatever deities were present and listening that he had his arms covered up.

“Just wanted to see how things were going here. Busy?”

“I’m always busy. Don’t you have a planet to protect?”

“I’m off duty. When do you get off?”

Darcy eyed him over her laptop screen. They’d been in an on-again, off-again arrangement for a while. Mostly off when Clint got into his broody cycles where he sat in his apartment with his
molding pizza boxes and reflected upon all his misdeeds, mostly on when they couldn’t take it any longer, or when Darcy got a glimpse of his arms, or when they were both up in the early hours of the morning because of patrols or on-call duties or time zones or any number of other things. It was **totally** unhealthy. But the sex was good.

*Really* good.

“I don’t. That’s my problem.”

Clint grinned in a way that made Darcy cross her legs. “Want some help with that?”

A few hours later, Darcy laid back against her pillows, stroking Clint’s head. “So,” she said. “I take it things are *done* with… what was her name?”

“Don’t.” Clint rolled onto his back and pushed his hands through his hair. “Yes.”

“You know, youuuuuu are making this a bad habit, gun show.” Darcy poked him in the ribs. “We almost get to a point where we can actually *figure out* what we are, but then you go run off to someone you’ve just met for a month or so of what has to be constant sex, and then you break up with whoever it is, and then you’re back here.”

“You’re getting a good deal.”

“No, Clint, I’m… okay, you’re *really* good in the sack, for an old guy—“

“Oh my god, Darcy, that is the *least* sexy—“

“Hey, shut up, I’m talking! Okay, *so* that’s great, but like, I know that’s not everything. *You* know that’s not everything too, which is why you keep running off.”

Clint eyed her. “Who have you been talking to?”

“Not important.”

“No, it is. Because last time we got to this discussion, *you* said you didn’t want to be a superhero girlfriend, and even though I kept insisting to you that I didn’t see you that way anyway, you didn’t believe me, and so I dropped it, because I figured I didn’t *deserve* it anyway—“

“Ugh, here we go again.” Darcy rolled away and rescued her bra from the floor. “It’s not the superhero part of things, it’s the *self-loathing.*”

She immediately felt bad, but kept her mouth shut. She was always talking, talking, ruining things… and Clint was silent behind her, but Darcy didn’t need him to say anything to know he was pissed.

“Fine.” She heard him rustling around, glanced over her shoulder to see him pulling on his pants and grabbing his shirt before walking calmly out of the bedroom. She sat there on the edge of the bed, bra in hand, until she heard the door of her apartment click shut. The bra dropped from her fingers as she put her head in her hands.

“*Fuck.*”

*

The palace was in an uproar. News that the mortals had manufactured a Tesseract of their own was supposed to be secret, so naturally within hours it had been all over the realm. Sif despaired of this, saying that whoever was passing information out to the rebels and guiding them would be able to use
this now, but Loki had shrugged it off.

“They would have learned eventually,” he said. “Some secrets are not worth trying to keep.”

Either way it meant that preparations that would have been completed in a month, when they made their scheduled diplomatic visit, now had to be finished in two days. Gowns and gifts were made and packed, and by the day of their departure, all their necessities were packed and ready to go.

“My mother is invested with the right to rule while I am gone,” Loki said as he and Sif left their chambers with Edwik in tow. Now head of their guard, his old Einherjar friend had taken the shift in duties very seriously, and even more so since they had announced Sif’s pregnancy. “Make sure she stays safe, Edwik.”

“No worries in that regard, my King. The safety of the royal family is what I have been charged with.” They took one of the enchanted lifts down the column of the palace, and stepped out into the bright sunlight of a bustling courtyard. “But is this early trip really advisable? So unexpected, and the Queen…”

“I do not like it,” Loki muttered, pulling his leather jacket so it lay smooth over his shoulders. “We should have had more time, and the stress is not good for… Sif, are you certain you ought to be—Sif!”

Turning in her saddle, Sif scowled at him. “I can ride just as well as I did when I was not pregnant, Loki,” she called. “Hurry up and I will race you to the Bifrost to prove it!”

“I should be going with you, my lord,” Edwik murmured as Loki checked over his tack. “If only to make sure that the Queen doesn’t get herself hurt.”

“Oh, she hates being hovered over, Edwik.”

“That she does.” Edwik held his horse’s reins as Loki mounted up. “I’ll keep the palace in good order for you, my King. Let’s hope you and your lady wife return in good order as well.”

“Let’s hope.” Loki spun his horse and trotted over to where Sif had one hand on her stomach and one shading her eyes, watching the proceedings with a critical eye. Her reins were only looped around the horn of her saddle, and pursing his lips, Loki resisted the urge to reach out and collect them in hand. If he did that Sif would be beyond cross with him, and he didn’t want to anger her now.

He caught Sif looking at him just as critically, and raised an eyebrow. She snorted.

“You are not as sneaky as you think you are, husband.”

“What gave it away?”

He looked back and Sif was smiling at him just slightly, and something in him eased.

“I know you,” she said quietly. Then her smile widened. “And you make a face.”

“I do not make any faces.”

“Of course not, what was I thinking.” She gave her mount a cue with her legs and shifted them over so her knee bumped his. “Nobody else is used to them.”

At last the whole entourage trotted out of the courtyard, and in flashes of light from the Bifrost were
gone.

*  

“I’m going to take them to Harstad.”

“If you do that, Director, we’ll—“

“You’ll what? Remove me as Director?” Fury glared at each one of the shadowy figures in turn. He hadn’t liked doing it – for all their reticence the Council had done its best to keep SHIELD’s interests in mind, provided all that SHIELD needed to keep operating. But times were changing, and the Council’s members were not the most flexible people.

“You need me,” he continued. “If anyone can salvage this, you all know it’s me. Who would you replace me with, anyway? Hill? She’s not ready yet.”

“We don’t agree—“

“Why do you think I sent her out to California with Beta Team? I’ve seen her reports and the critiques of the West Coast team’s work and they’re promising. But she’s not seasoned enough. I put her there so one day - one day - she would be ready to take the helm.”

“Agent Coulson—“

“Doesn’t want this position. He’s said as much.”

“We think you’re letting your personal feelings get in the way.”

“Oh, do you?” Fury smirked. “If they were, don’t you think I’d have made him take my place a long time ago? Do you think I’d have given a damn about grooming Hill?”

“What if they confiscate this cube too?” That was one of the women. She had a coolly accented voice. “Then our only option is Dr. Foster’s Bifrost system, and she’s beholden to Asgard.”

“Then that’s what we have. But I think I can talk Asgard out of taking our cube back with them. Remember, Lady Councilor, they already have one. I don’t know if the King will want two so close together, we won’t know what it’ll do.”

“You think.”

“We won’t know until it happens, ma’am. But I’ll tell you all now, you can tell me not to, but you aren’t out here. You sit in your offices and behind your desks and think you can move the world, but you don’t see what it’s like. You aren’t the ones making the calls and dealing with the fallout. I’m doing it, and if any of you actually fucking thought that someone else could do what I do, I’d have been gone.” Mercifully, they were all silent, and Fury swept all of them one more time with his glare before he leaned forward, finger over the disconnect icon. “Now, I’ve got to handle an interplanetary incident. Fury out.”

As he left the secure comm room and walked the steely gray corridors toward the command deck, Fury wondered if he’d finally gone too far with the Council. But he didn’t linger too long upon that thought; there were too many other things to do, and too little time to do them in.

He just had to hope that he could hold things together.

*
London was to have been one of the last stops on Sif and Loki’s diplomatic tour; the original plan had them arriving on the newly designated Bifrost site in Buenos Aires, then proceeding from there to several more countries over the course of several weeks. Thus the city was startled when clouds roiled above the Bifrost site and a beam of light delivered Sif and Loki and their retinue into the middle of Kensington Park. The horses’ breath steamed the air – decidedly more humid than it had been a few days ago – and onlookers clustered around hastily erected barriers, snapping pictures.

Thor and Jane were waiting inside the barriers. The thunderclouds above must have reflected Thor’s mood; no rain fell, but thunder rumbled and lightning flashed, and the heat was oppressive.

“And people tell me I am the dramatic one,” Loki said, dismounting. He suffered a hug from his brother and one more from Jane. “Really, is this necessary, Thor?”

“Are you not displeased, Loki?”

Loki opened his mouth to argue back, but caught sight of Sif dismounting. He stiffened, prepared for the worst… but her feet hit the ground and she seemed none the worse for it. Thor actually laughed, and for a moment the thunder seemed to quiet.

“She is much more resilient than you seem to think lately, Brother,” he said as they walked toward the waiting SHIELD vehicles that had finally pulled up to the nearby street. “Sif can in fact survive without you around. Would you not know through the marriage spells if harm had befallen her?”

“I would,” Loki muttered, “But that does not stop me from trying to get her to be a little less reckless. It is as if she thinks she has something to prove.”

“Perhaps you may try talking to her.” At Loki’s disbelieving look, Thor shrugged. “It works with Jane.”

“I only want to protect her and protect our child.” One of his guard squeezed into the black SUV and the doors were shut. Loki watched as Sif and Jane – the mortal woman talking very quickly and gesturing with her hands – were directed to the car behind them. Anxiety twisted his stomach about not having Sif close by, but he had watched her slide three knives into her boots and belt that morning and forced the sick feeling away. “There are things beyond Yggdrasil’s reach, Thor. Old, hungry things, and the Tesseract and this new cube are doorways for them. If they can open those doors…”

He trailed off as they pulled away, heading toward SHIELD’s underground installation in the city. Loki watched Thor’s ghostly reflection in the window, and the anxiety turned to irritation. Thor was used to being able to solve problems in a certain, very direct way. He still had difficulty with problems that were insubstantial.

“Loki?”

He put on a carefully lighthearted mask and smiled. “Forgive me, Thor,” he said with a smile. “Obviously I have been under quite a lot of stress, lately. Asgard and its minutiae, the squabbling of my advisors and councils, Sif insisting on riding about the realms at top speed… do you know she actually went to Vanaheim to talk to a city full of rebels?”

They spend the rest of the ride discussing the spate of uprisings across the lighter and darker realms. The ones in Nidavellir and Svartalfaheim were most troubling, as those realms were only nominally friendly to Asgard; they relied on its trade and its inhabitants’ penchant for needing shiny weaponry with absurd names, but if they thought their allegiance would be better placed elsewhere, Loki had no doubt that they would switch in a heartbeat.
The underground bunker where SHIELD had located its headquarters in London was dim and damp, and much to the surprise of the mortal guards around him Loki conjured a mage light, illuminating the chamber they were in with a ghostly glow. Sif found her way to his side.

“Ready to do battle?” she murmured as they crowded into an elevator. Faintly, he could hear thunder rumble overhead.

“I think we both know this is the kind of war I can fight.”

Sif laughed. “I will tell that to all the enemies you have felled in our many years of adventuring,” she said. “But your words are as sharp as my swords, husband. And if all else fails, I can make our point for us.”

* 

The orbiting base that housed SWORD operations had no windows facing the planet. It was designed that way to keep the base from being easily spotted by any schmuck happening to look up with a telescope, but it made the agents stationed there a little melancholy. What was the point of being in space if they couldn’t take selfies with Earth itself in the background?

Whenever she heard her underlings complaining about this, Special Agent Abigail Brand would remind them – perhaps more forcefully than necessary – that their job wasn’t to watch Earth but the stars. Just because there was a planet of aliens out there that was friendly, she’d tell them, didn’t mean there weren’t ten, twenty, a hundred more that would be happy to subjugate, kill, or destroy their home. The surface had its own protectors. SWORD was there to protect the whole thing.

Right now, however, Brand wished for something, even the tiniest port that would have allowed her to look down upon the Earth. It was probably a backwards shithole compared to other places in the galaxy (and she’d seen pictures of Asgard, what was Earth to them?), but it was home, and right now, it was in big trouble.

“I need a secure line to Director Fury,” she said to one of the comm jockeys. “In my ready room. Now.”

“Yes, Agent Brand,” drifted back to her as she stalked across the observation deck to her ready room. The general noise of the deck cut off abruptly as she privacy-locked the door. Sometimes she was really grateful that SWORD got a lot of the cool new tech coming out of R&D.

It took a minute, but Director Fury’s face appeared on her wall screen. “Report,” he said tersely.

“Something’s got him ruffled, she thought. “Director Fury, we’re detecting more activity in the sector of space we’ve been monitoring for the last six months. It’s been growing steadily and has reached critical levels at this point, Sir. We need—“

“To be a little more patient, Agent Brand.”

“Sir, with all due respect, this is an unprecedented level of activity. Here’s the telemetry,” and she tapped a few icons on her tablet as graphs and grainy infrared imagery appeared on the side of the screen. “I sent a report to you a few days ago and got ‘hold at current alert level’ back. I don’t think that’s going to cut it, sir, all readings indicate that whatever is out there is on the move.”

“Are they heading for us?”

“We’re not sure yet, sir, but—“
“Agent Brand, I know you won’t like this, but I don’t really give a damn what you do or don’t like right now, I’ve got bigger problems down here right now. Until you can offer me conclusive proof that whatever’s out there is headed for us, you are to hold and wait for further orders.”

“But sir, all this was supposed to be for a situation just like this. SWORD, Project Genie—“

“It won’t matter if the problems here right now aren’t solved. I’m sorry, Agent Brand. I’m going to have to keep asking you to hang tight.”

The screen went dark and Brand slammed her hand down on her desk. Fury wasn’t up here looking at her data, he didn’t know. But until he got his head out of his ass and figured out that something was going on, Brand could do whatever was in her power to make sure Earth stayed safe, with or without Fury’s approval.

Straightening her back and squaring her shoulders, Brand left her ready room and began to issue orders.

* *

“What, precisely, were you thinking?”

Sif suppressed the urge to grip her husband’s wrist and get him back under control. It had been her fault she’d allowed Loki to build steam and start digging his claws in, and once he got like this he could be utterly impossible to stop. She sincerely hoped that their child inherited none of that, or at least that he or she got it in an amount tempered with the good sense of knowing when to let up.

But she couldn’t say she wasn’t as angry as he was. Sif was a creature built on loyalty and duty and honor, and SHIELD’s betrayal of Asgard’s trust was also, through the way she had been bound to the realm, a betrayal of her personally. As unused to playing the diplomat as she was, though, she had to admit that allowing Loki’s tirade to carry on longer would be permanently damaging.

“Husband,” she said, loud and sharp, “Perhaps we may give the Director a chance to explain his actions. I am certain he will make it very convincing.”

She finished with a very pointed look at Fury, who returned her gesture with a curt nod. His expression was usually impassive, but now his brows had drawn together, the edges of his eyepatch cutting deeply into his skin. Sif bristled; how dare he have the nerve to look affronted when he was the one who had lied to them for years!

“When the initial treaty was signed,” Fury began, “We did fulfill our end of the agreement – we retained no copy of the work we’d done with the Tesseract up to that point. But there was a resource and we tapped it – the minds of the researchers, anyone who had read Dr. Foster’s work. We knew some of our scientists were working for others, too – other governments, people like Victor Von Doom – and we let them continue on with their work until we knew it could yield results we could use.”

“And then you sent us in,” Tony said. The Avengers were in attendance as well; Tony and Steve had been livid, though for different reasons. Natasha had seemed coolly unsurprised about it, and knowing what little she did of the woman’s background, Sif could only surmise that it was because she had expected SHIELD to be doing something of this nature. Clint and Bruce had been much the same. When they had been waiting, Bruce had admitted that he and Tony and spent much of the last few years trying to find something like this, so knowing it actually existed wasn’t so much of a shock.
“You sent us in, and you let us take your hits for you so you can outsource your science fair projects.”

“How many of our missions have been the result of situations you engineered?” Steve asked. He had his arms crossed, looking up the long table at Fury. “How many times did we put our lives and the lives of others in danger to get back something you needed for this project?”

“And why didn’t you keep better track of your people?” When Jane was angry she seemed much larger than her slight frame, and she was very obviously angry now. “Von Paselk was one of yours, wasn’t he?”

“Doom’s. We always knew he was a Latverian plant.”

“Frankly, I don’t know why you would have kept people who you knew to be disloyal,” Loki muttered, scrolling through more screens.

“By that logic we ought to do away with half the court.” Sif leaned back in her chair, one hand stroking her side as she felt the babe shift and push against her. She knew Loki knew exactly why Fury kept such individuals around – better to know where your enemies were than to have to guess – but that was hardly the pressing matter.

“Why, Director Fury?” she asked. “You still have not answered that question, and I think it quite important that you do so.”

Fury’s expression had become a little less tight, though no less angry, and at least he had the presence of mind to nod at her this time. “Protection,” he said. “And lessening our reliance on Asgard for interstellar transport.”

Thor shifted beside Jane. “Your requests have been no burden on Asgard,” he said, glancing at Loki as he spoke. His brother nodded, eyes narrowing as he looked at Fury. Sif could see his wheels turning, though, and wondered what exactly was brewing in her husband’s mind.

“You have been perfectly content for four years to use our resources – the Bifrost, the skills of our warriors. Why then do you insult us this way?”

“Because not everyone wants you to know what we’re doing, Your Majesty,” Fury snapped. “And we do not want to rely on the good graces of another power forever, a power we can’t control.”

“You’re right,” Sif said, her voice icy. “You could not control Asgard’s wishes. But why not then rely on Jane? She is as intelligent a mortal as I have ever met, and knows as much of the Bifrost as my half-brother.”

“Because she is married to me,” Thor rumbled. His eyes were narrowed too. “Is that not correct, Fury?”

“What,” Jane said, “You don’t think I could remain objective?”

“No, I don’t.” Fury eyed her. “If you had to choose between Thor, your family, and us, do you really think it would be a contest?”

“That’s not fair,” Steve cut in. “You’re asking if she can choose between who she is – what she believes in – and something that would make her violate—“

“But that’s exactly what we do – what SHIELD does, Captain. You know about making hard calls, all of you. That’s what I do on a daily basis. I don’t get the luxury of being able to choose the best or
most ethical path. Sometimes all I have left is the one that’ll piss off the fewest people, and even \textit{that} can be abhorrent to me. Don’t you all get it? That’s why I authorized Project Genie. There are things out there in space that threaten this world, and it’s my duty to see that at the end of the day, Earth can protect itself, \textit{without} Asgard if need be. Whatever’s out there – and we know that something \textit{must} be out there – we have to be able to level the playing field.”

Beside her, Loki stiffened, but said nothing. Sif touched his hand at last, just enough to get his attention, and he tilted his head slightly toward her. She knew his \textit{I’ll explain later} look, and nodded, withdrawing her hand.

“It’s quite a pat little story,” Loki said at last, the chill of his glare lowering the temperature in the room. “Certainly you may not have Asgard’s support \textit{now}—

“Brother—“

“Husband, do you not think—“

Loki shot them both quelling looks, and then more to others who had protested too. “But certainly reparations can be made. You have broken an expressly made promise, and I think you know me quite well, Director. You know I do not suffer this kind of treatment \textit{lightly}.”

“Asgard will surely not sever all ties,” Thor said in a rush. “Brother?”

“My mind is not yet made up on that matter,” Loki said delicately. “I will need time to reflect and consult with my queen, and we must rest after our journey. The stress is surely not good for her—“

“She is handling the stress admirably,” Sif interrupted firmly. “But rest and time to collect our thoughts will be necessary.”

“I want to see your lab.” Jane had crossed her arms on the table. “I want to see this cube for myself. Do you even \textit{realize} the energies you’re working with? If that thing’s unstable—“

“It is, actually.” Fury said. “And we’ve never been able to get it to replicate the original Tesseract’s behavior. I’ll give you that data in your room, Dr. Foster. And I’ll arrange a flight to Harstad tomorrow morning.”

“We can go tonight—“

“Tomorrow,” Loki said with an air of regal finality that made Jane scowl at him. Privately Sif was glad for it, since she needed the time to think… and, irritatingly, she was actually tired, but she supposed it was normal to be thus.

“Tomorrow. Everyone try not to stay up too late.” Fury left the room, and immediately everyone started talking.

“Used,” Tony was saying, waving his arms expansively. “Fucking \textit{used}, and he wonders why we don’t fucking trust him—“

“Like any other thing we do for SHIELD isn’t them using us,” Clint muttered. He seemed oddly tetchy, and Natasha was giving him sidelong looks out the corner of her eye.

“I thought something might be going on when we did that run in Latveria,” she said. “I happened to see what it was I’d been told specifically to be sure to get out of their lab servers. It was all information about Tesseract energy.”
“I guess now I know what that optics glass is for.” Bruce tapped a few things on his screen and an image of the Tesseract appeared in the center of the table. “It’s a container.”

“There is nothing that can contain that kind of energy—“

“Apparently they’ve found a way.” Jane pulled out her tablet from its slot and took it off somewhere to crunch numbers, and once she left the others drifted off singly or in pairs, until it was only her and Thor and Loki left.

“Well,” Loki said cheerfully. “We’ve so much to catch up on, wouldn’t you say?”

* 

Night was never truly dark on Asgard. With the stars above, the luminous Branches of Yggdrasil arching across the heavens, and the inherent luminosity of the buildings in the city, the realm was always suffused with a soft glow even in the small hours of the morning when most slept.

Luckily, he had his own means of passing unseen.

Fingering one of the charms sewn into the lining of his cloak, he felt the customary chill that was the activation of the spell it carried. The guards he passed in the more populated corridors – some barely inches from the billowing hem of his cloak – did not so much as blink, and even the ones who did react with chills or the sudden sense of being watched, those who had more magic in their blood than the average Asgardian, eventually relaxed. So it was a simple matter for him to pass unseen out of the palace and onto the broad parade ground before it.

Once there he was able to activate the other charm he carried and step onto the shadowed paths. Here he ran quickly toward his destination, for Loki would have had the advantage of him here. Whereas his esteemed king had ways of protecting himself here and repelling the creatures that called these spaces home, the man had no such talent. He was careful and quiet and breathed a sigh of relief when he emerged into Alfheim’s sunrise.

“You’re late.”

He hated dealing with elves – as much as he appreciated their bows and blades, they did not bend the knee to the throne, and so he did not trust their allegiances. But he needed these particular elves, so he dealt with his prejudices accordingly. “You are not the only ones I have communication with. I am a busy man, and you have failed me before.”

“If the Asgardian queen had not gotten involved—“

“But she did, and now here we are years later, trying to get ourselves back on track. It seems elves are not all they make themselves out to be.” He smirked, not that they could see it under his hood. “But all that aside, let us talk about the plans that are now in motion. While I have my doubts that you’ll be able to carry them out, I have no other options, so do listen up.”

He gave them their instructions, and after one last not-so-subtle jab at their inability to carry out simple tasks, stepped once more into the shadowed paths. At his next destination it was much the same, and after he had met with four such groups, he traveled to an intermediate place in order to collect his thoughts. This last stop he had to make was the most worrisome, for his employer was one even the Allfather was said to fear.

But he had made his bed and it was far too late, events much too far along the path to what he wanted for Asgard to stop now. He took a deep breath and stepped once again into the shadowed paths.
The trip this time was much longer and colder than before. He was moving beyond Yggdrasil’s reach and out into the cold reaches of the realms beyond the Nine, and the journey was far more treacherous.

At last he emerged into light not much brighter than the paths themselves. A hazy, silvery light suffused the air, and as he crossed the slightly uneven surface of the rock he had emerged on, his footsteps seemed oddly muffled. It was the space around him, he thought, absorbing any sound he made.

“I have come,” he said when he’d climbed the hundred stairs and stood behind the great chair where his employer (he did not fool himself into thinking that they were co-conspirators, there was a definite imbalance of power here) sat and surveyed the endless void. He shivered, and kept his eyes on the chair; looking too long at the stars made him feel as though he was falling, falling without hope of being caught, and it was the least pleasant thing he knew of.

“Is it done?”

“Yes, my lord Thanos. It is done; rebellion is stirring among the Nine Realms once more, and when you arrive at Asgard, the Realm Eternal will be greatly destabilized. You will be able to all but walk up to the throne itself, if you chose.”

His voice had chilled, and it was a dangerous thing to do that with the Mad Titan. But they had had a deal, and though he had no illusions that Thanos would break it if it served his own purpose, he did like to think he had made himself indispensable over the last four years.

It had not escaped Thanos.

“You know I desire no throne,” the Titan said, his voice deep and slightly mocking. A primal fear rose in the man. “The station I aspire to is greater, more enduring than the seat of any monarch, even one such as the Realm Eternal. As mortals are to you, so you are to me – a buzzing fly, waiting to be swatted and die a most ignoble and forgettable death.”

Something about his own words amused him, for Thanos then laughed. “But even in death you serve my purposes,” he said. “If all is ready, then, it will soon occur. See that you keep your own machine well-oiled, Asgardian. I have far greater matters to attend to.”

The man bowed. “My lord,” he said, and turned to go.

“Oh, there is one more thing.”

He froze. “What is it, my lord Thanos?”

“Do not presume to take such a tone of voice with me again. Your usefulness to me is finite, remember.”

The man drew a breath, and was pleased when his voice was smooth and level and did not shake with fear.

“I won’t forget again,” he said, and vanished.

* 

Sif eyed her husband that night as she dressed for bed. London was cold and so was she most of the time, and neither Eir nor Loki had been able tell her if it was a side effect of carrying a half-Jotun child. Loki had been rather alarmed at this news, but had been soothed by the discovery that warmed
night clothes and a comfortable couch formed in the curve of his side kept her at a pleasant temperature through the night.

Still, the rugs did little to dispel the chill of the stone floor of their suite in a house purchased especially for their visits, and Sif wrapped her arms around herself as she walked over to where Loki had seated himself before the fire after dinner and promptly conjured a book into his hands.

“What are you reading?” she asked as she made herself comfortable. “It looks… dense.”

“It is. But I think it will become important.” He closed the book and Sif read the title as his fingers trailed across its runes.

“The Realms Beyond the Realms. You’ve read that before.”

“Yes, well, the words do not disappear the first time. Ouch!” With an aggrieved look he rubbed the spot where she’d poked him in the ribs. “Heartless woman!”

“Intolerant of your foolishness. Why do you think it might be important?”

“Director Fury said there were things in space that threatened Earth.”

“I thought he might be speaking hypothetically,” Sif mused. “But he seemed certain.”

“He did. Which means he knows something we do not, and I think it may have something to do with some of the accounts in this book, though which ones I cannot say.” He slid his fingers over it again and then waved his hand. The book disappeared in a glimmer of green light, and Loki put his hands to better use working out the knots in her shoulders.

Even though she was not yet very large, Sif could not pretend it was not a strain on her body. And it felt good, and served to strengthen the magic that had been used to bind them together on the day of their wedding. Frigga had said that their bond would become even deeper – the nature of the marriage spells was such that the longer they held, the more powerful they became – but even now it was a much more comforting weight than it had been at the first.

“Aren’t you purring?”

Sif poked his thigh, leaning back as his fingers found a particularly difficult knot. “It feels good. What would you have me do, complain?”

“I like making you purr much more. ‘Tis a pleasant sound, unlike your usual caterwauling.”

“Just you wait until this babe is born,” Sif told him. “You’ll have a whole symphony of sound to assault your ears.”

Loki groaned, but his hands temporarily abandoned their work and slid to her abdomen, using gentle pressure to pull her back. Sif laid her hands atop his, her eyes slitted open so the flames in the fireplace seemed haloed.

“Yule is barely three months away,” he said quietly. “Do you suppose by then…”

“If not then I will go to Eir and have her work her magic to deliver the child anyway. I already feel much larger than normal, I cannot imagine what it will be like when this little one is ready to be born.”

Loki rubbed his thumbs along her sides. He had become very affectionate toward her over the past
few months, and though it was strange, Sif had to admit she enjoyed the attention. Her body was already changing, growing to accommodate the child within her. She did wonder if she would ever be the same.

Turning her head Sif slid her lips along his jaw until Loki twisted and kissed her, one hand burying itself in her hair. The heat in their kiss reassured her.

“Should we not be discussing how we are going to slowly take Director Fury apart?” she asked when they pulled apart. Loki shook his head, pushing his face into her hair.

“There will be time for that,” he said. “Later.”

*M*

Morning saw them onto a quinjet, speeding out over water as they flew east toward Norway. They had left before dawn so they wouldn’t be bothered by tourists and fans and others come to gawk at alien royalty and chased the sunrise across the sea.

The first few seats behind the cockpit were full of SHIELD; Fury and Coulson took up two beside the console, talking quietly. One, a lady with dark hair and watchful eyes, sat opposite them and watched the rest of the passengers. Sif eyed her, and marked her for a dangerous one.

Her thoughts were with her husband, though. Loki sat in his seat beside her with his legs spread wide, lounging as though the plastic seat with its webbing was the throne of Asgard. Despite the fact her armor no longer fit her, Sif had prevailed upon Asgard’s armorers and couturiers, and they had produced for her tunics of leather and silk appropriate for a queen, but also affording some protection. Her shield and glaive rested between her own legs, and though Sif did not think she would use them, she felt comforted by having them. Morning had brought her insult and apprehension about this whole situation back. If she trusted nothing else to serve her in a fight, she trusted her glaive.

On her other side, Thor and Jane were speaking quietly, as they had been since the quinjet had left. Their words were lost in the drone of the engines. The one good thing about this kind of travel, she thought, was that it afforded some privacy in such close quarters.

Two hours later they were flying above the coastline of Norway, and in another hour they had reached Harstad, flying over it to the SHIELD installation just north of the city. There weren’t any windows to look through, but in glimpses she caught through the cockpit’s windows, Sif could tell it was not as expansive a base as the one in New Mexico had been, having only a few buildings and a large landing pad.

When they had landed and walked down the ramp into the chilly wind, Director Fury led them to where a group of men and women were clustered around one of the doors of the largest building there. “Most of our facilities here are underground, to insulate us from detection. We have additional levels of shielding, of course, but apparently our tests have had other effects we haven’t been aware of.”

“You would have been if you’d asked us,” Jane said icily. Fury gave her a long stare before he gestured to the group of people huddled against the wind.

“These are the leaders of this base,” he said. “Special Agent Christina Drall is in charge—” a woman standing slightly apart from the rest nodded “—and manages these scientists.”

“You,” Sif hissed, picking Von Paselk out of the group. He gave her a broad grin.
“I see you got better,” he said. Sif gripped the hilt of her collapsed glaive and started forward, but Loki and Thor grabbed her arms and held her back.

“Not that we don’t think you could beat him soundly, wife,” Loki told her.

“But I think we have more pressing business,” Thor finished. Sif relented, but her eyes did not leave the scientist.

“You told us he was dead,” she said to Fury.

“We needed his knowledge. He’s kept securely here.”

“The devil you know,” Bruce muttered. “Can we get inside? It’s freezing out here.”

The building turned out to be the living quarters for all on the base, centered around an atrium with a bank of elevators. Fury indicated that most of the scientists – especially Von Paselk – ought to return to their quarters. The lead scientists, Agent Drell, and the woman from the quinjet – Coulson had referred to her as Agent May – took them down in groups. The Avengers first, with Agent May and Coulson, and Sif and Loki in another car with Director Fury and Agent Drell.

The elevators opened up onto a long hallway ending at a set of black doors. As they got close, Loki slowed, then held his hand out before him and summoned a ball of green light that sputtered and died as they watched. He glared at Fury once more.

“The stone,” he said coldly. “You’ve lined this place with it.”

“We salvaged as much as we could from every place we’ve found it in,” Fury said. “From Dr. Banner’s research – what little he’s allowed into our hands, anyway—we know it suppresses certain forms of radiation, including the kind our cube puts out. If we knew how magic worked we’d know precisely how it suppresses yours, Your Majesty.”

“You’ve neither the talent nor the mind for it, Director,” Loki replied archly.

The chamber they came into after passing the black stone doors was cavernous, not entirely unlike the original lab the Tesseract had been in. At one end, banks of computer terminals; at the other…

“You truly did it,” Loki murmured. He and Jane were the first ones down to the lab floor and crossing it to go examine the cube on its pedestal. The rest of them followed.

The cube, she saw when she reached it, was both like and unlike the Tesseract. Where the original seemed to hold its energies in its chosen shape, this one was obviously crafted, the joins in the glass clearly visible. The light within it seemed duller, moreso even than the Tesseract in its current state. Sif felt its touch upon her skin, though, and stepped away as soon as she had approached.

“How could you have done this?” she breathed, putting her hands protectively over her abdomen. She did not want her unborn child anywhere near that thing. “You knew the power of the original Tesseract and yet you emulated it. If it was protection you needed, surely there was another way.”

“It would have taken far longer. We knew this way best.” Director Fury crossed his arms. “It was the best option.”

“People thought the nuke was the best option,” Tony said. “And look where that’s gotten this rock.”

“Says the man whose family made its fortune building more and more destructive weapons.”
“It must be fun for you to trot that line out whenever you feel like I’m getting too close to uncomfortable territory, Fury. Besides, I thought you and my dad were friends.”

“I was friends with your father too,” Steve told him. “And that still wouldn’t stop me from saying that I wish he hadn’t gone that way.”

“Because it totally matters now.”

Sif left them, wandering past thick cables and controls. On a pedestal, Jane had pulled up a panel and was up to her elbows in it, and Loki was examining the cube, leaning over it. Sif did not like him being so close to it, knowing what the Tesseract had done to him before, but let it pass. She would know if he was starting to get pulled in, and as she watched, he jumped back, shaking the hand he’d been holding near it. Catching her eye, he shrugged.

“It shocked me,” he said. Sif rolled her eyes and continued on.

Most of the computers only displayed SHIELD’s sigil, but some of them seemed to be active, and it was those Sif perused. Much of it she did not completely understand, though some of it seemed to be focused on space rather than on this place, which she found foreboding given their conversations yesterday. Another monitor caught her eye, and curious, Sif went to look at it. The display was apparently a graphic of the cube, showing in shifting red and blue. As she watched, the red crept outward like blood staining a bandage. She glanced up – Loki had left the cube behind and was now next to Jane, the two of them chattering away as they worked.

Sif smiled, stroking her belly. *May you have your father’s thirst for knowledge, little one,* she thought.

That moment aside, she leaned back from the terminal, eying the still-arguing group. “Tony Stark!” she called, gesturing him over. He got off a parting shot and wandered over to her.

“Should I be flattered it’s me and not your babydaddy you’re calling for?”

“He’s preoccupied at the moment.” Sif pointed at the display. “What is this showing? I see the cube, but I cannot understand its meaning.”

Tony flicked his fingers, and three windows enlarged so the screen was divided into quarters. One showed the old display of the cube, the red spreading across it; the others showed shifting patterns. “It shouldn’t be doing this,” he muttered. “They said that there hadn’t been any successful…”

“What is it?”

“See this graph here?” Tony pointed and tapped the window, enlarging it. “This is the emissions spectra for the cube – how much energy it’s putting out and what kind. It’s drawing in an enormous amount of power, but every other reading has put it at about a fifth of what the Tesseract’s at even in its dormant state. It shouldn’t be doing this.”

As he spoke, a chill went down Sif’s spine, and she leaned around the terminal again. “Loki! Get back from there and get Jane away!”

Loki waved a hand lazily in her direction. “Just a moment!”

“By all the gods, Loki, now is not the time to be pigheaded—“

Their shouting had gotten Thor’s attention. “What is going on?”
“Hey, Fury!” Tony pointed at the cube, now throwing off sparks. “It’s not supposed to be doing that, right?”

“What the hell…”

Fury took two steps toward them, and then all hell broke loose.

The sparks suddenly spiraled back into the cube and it blazed bright blue-white. Sif threw up a hand against the sudden light, but it quickly dimmed away as the cube shot a beam directly at the platform where Loki and Jane had suddenly stopped what they were doing, frozen in shock. The beam shot past them and struck the back wall, and what she saw next filled Sif with more fear than she had ever experienced in her life.

The blackness of space, flecked with stars, no comforting light of Yggdrasil’s branches, and just beyond, a swirling, grasping nebula—

And her husband, right in front of it.

“Loki, no!” she screamed, and despite the sudden wind that filled the room darted forward. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Thor running for Jane, and put on a burst of speed.

It wasn’t enough. With a scream, Jane was lifted off her feet and sucked into the portal, and her own cry of frustration was drowned out by Thor’s roar of anguish. Loki saw her coming and put up a hand, trying to run toward her, to stop her from coming closer and putting herself in danger of following Jane through.

The wind grabbed him, the powerful suction of open vacuum, and Loki was lifted off his feet even as his boots hit the cement floor of the lab. He grabbed one of the poles guiding cables from the cube pedestal to the platform.

“Get her back, Thor!” he yelled, his blue eyes wide. “I can’t—it can’t be her!”

Sif snarled at him. “Don’t be an idiot, Loki, I have to—“

“No! Sif, please!”

Thor put up an arm before her and, caught off balance, Sif fell backward, curling up instinctively around her stomach. From where she lay she saw Thor skidding forward as far as he could go, using Mjolnir as an anchor as he reached out to his brother. The pole Loki held was being pulled out of the cement floor, and fearful, he reached for Thor’s hand.

Their fingers brushed, caught—

And then slipped away, and Sif did not think that she would ever get the image of the look of despair on Loki’s face out of her mind, or the sound of Thor’s sobs out of her ears.
I was going to write more in this chapter, but ended up hitting a natural stopping point. You are all getting half of what would have been a longer chapter including events not on Earth now, rather than waiting for me to write all the other stuff going on. With how busy I am now, I figure this way is better than not getting anything out to you at all for a month or more.

I'm sorry. The pain doesn't ease up here.

*event horizon*; a boundary in spacetime beyond which events cannot affect an outside observer.

The hole in space vanished as quickly as it had appeared, the blue light getting sucked back into the cube. Its muddied blue energies whirled slowly, sinuously, and then it was glowing on its pedestal once more.

Sif was aware of every breath, every heartbeat; if she concentrated, she thought she might even feel her child’s, *their* child’s, *could* feel it beating against her palms where they cradled her stomach. The concrete floor warmed where her cheek pressed against it; the silk panels of her tunic slippery against her skin. She was hyperaware of every sensation.

Mostly, though, she was aware that Loki was gone. As she got to her feet the spells that had been like a blanket across her shoulders now seemed like a leather jerkin laced too tightly, or perhaps a cord pulled too tight, so attenuated that it might snap at any moment.

Several people were yelling, some of the machinery was throwing off sparks, and none of it was at all important.

“Director,” she said. Her voice cracked, the taut cord that still connected her and her husband plucked by the growing sense of panic that rose in her chest. Nobody seemed to be listening to her, and it made the hysteria rise a little more.

“Director!” Sif called again, coupling her voice with powerful strides. The knot of people around Fury loosened and spread out at the sight of her advancing on them, her hands clenched into fists. Even Fury’s eye widened just slightly, and if Sif had been thinking clearly she would have laughed that the one thing to break Fury’s cool was an angry, grief-stricken pregnant woman. But she wasn’t thinking, and perhaps that was what let her walk right up to Fury and punch him.

That opened the floodgates. Sif had no idea what she was saying, only that she kept moving and kept screaming, her heart pounding in her ears and her vision blurring in rage. Nobody seemed willing or able to step in and stop her until she felt hands grasp her arms and pull her back against solid, familiar armor.

“Sif—Sif! Sif, you must calm yourself, Sif, please—“

The hands spun her and she was facing Thor, her wrists grasped firmly in his hands. His eyes were
red too, but his voice didn’t shake at all.

“Sif, you have made your point,” he said gently, “And I do not think Fury will forget it anytime soon. But you must be calm.”

It hit her then, all in a rush; she had not been the only one to have to watch someone she loved sucked into the void, and her friend had been doubly affected. Taking a deep breath, she gave Thor a slight nod and he released her wrists slowly, watching her until she let them drop to her sides. Sif closed her eyes, willing the stinging to go away or at least wait until she had the time to acknowledge it.

“I apologize for my behavior,” she said, turning to face Fury once more. “It was not becoming for a queen. We will speak later on this, but I require time to collect myself and my thoughts.”

He had a hand to his nose and she saw in his eyes he was wary of her, but perhaps wisely, Fury nodded. “Of course, Your Majesty. Let me know when you are ready.”

“I will. Thor, your counsel is needed. Please come with me.”

Sif felt a measure of pride that she made it to a hastily-cleared reading lounge without so much as a glimmer in her eye, but as soon as Thor had quietly shut the door her resolve crumbled. The tears came hot and hard, and angrily she swiped at her face; she had made it hundreds of years without behaving in such a way, but now she felt weak and angry because of it.

“Shhh,” Sif heard, as gentle hands took her by the shoulders and guided her down to a chair. “Let it out, Sif. There is one here who shares your grief.”

So she did. She put her head on his shoulder and let the tears fall. After a while she felt something wet in her hair, and realized that Thor was crying too, a victim of the same sudden ache made worse by the fact he had no way of knowing for sure that Jane was alive. At least she had that comfort.

When at last she felt as though she could speak, Sif sat back, cupping the cheeks of her oldest friend. “I am sorry,” she told him. “Loki is not only my husband and Jane is not only your wife and they are both lost, and here I am sobbing like a child. It is an awful way to treat you, Thor.”

“You have not offended me.” He took her hands and held them in both of his, big and calloused and familiar. “To be honest, Sif, I needed a moment myself. If you had not leaped into the fray, I might have done it myself.”

“The fact that you did not speaks to how you’ve changed, my friend.” That made her laugh, and Thor chuckled a little too. And with that her heartache eased a little, and she could sit up, square her shoulders, lift her chin. Thor watched her with a curious look in his eye. Sif caught him looking and raised an eyebrow, and he snorted.

“I was about to say you did much the same thing my mother always does when something has made her sorrowful,” he said. “She does not deny it, but she also does not let it hold her back. But that look… that was Loki. I remember seeing it a thousand times…”

They both laughed, and Sif leaned her head against his shoulder a moment later, her hands going to her stomach. With Thor’s heartbeat under her cheek and her child’s under her palms, Sif felt her grief ebb away, replaced by steely resolve and a strong, nearly overwhelming sense of purpose. Her fingers dug into the gentle swell of her belly, just enough to feel the baby’s heartbeat a little more strongly.

_I will rescue your aunt_, she thought. _I will bring your father home before you are born, little one. I_
With that resolve in her heart she sat up, and her voice was steady and sharp. She was Queen of Asgard, and she ruled now. She had cried for her lost husband, but now it was time to bring him and the princess of the realm home.

“So, here is what we will do.”

* *

When they reemerged, there were more people in the room. The cube had been removed from its pedestal and placed in a shielded case. Sif didn’t think that anything would stop such an object from doing what it willed, but just like a well-timed encouragement from a leader could bolster the morale of a soldier, so could a physical barrier provide comfort when it was likely useless. She felt better with it out of sight, anyway.

“Director Fury,” she said, long strides taking her over to the knot of scientists and SHIELD agents. Agent May was speaking quietly into a headset, slightly turned away from the group; there was a new woman there too, a blonde in a bright red, gold, and blue uniform. Tony was eyeing her speculatively.

Fury turned around, his hands on his hips. “Your Majesty,” he said. Sif resolved to let the edge in his voice slide; after all, she had punched him in the nose, and owed him a little slack, for he had obviously not planned to have the cube activate and send her husband and sister by marriage into a hole in space. “Have you had enough time?”

“I believe so. There is much I have to discuss with you, and none of it involves fists.”

“That’s good. For what it’s worth, Lady Sif, I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted. Is there somewhere we may all speak?”

“Conference room.”

They went up a level to a room with a long table and comfortable chairs. Sif stood at the head of it as everyone filed in and took seats. While they were waiting, the blonde woman came and introduced herself. Much to Sif’s pleasure, she had a firm handshake and a bearing that reminded her of a soldier.

“Carol Danvers,” she said with a smile. “Alias Captain Marvel. I’ve been assigned to guard this thing when it goes to…” she turned to Agent May. “Where am I going again?”

“The Sandbox,” Agent May said. Her voice was cool and businesslike. “I’m afraid I can’t give out the coordinates. They’ll be programmed into your quinjet.”

“It’ll be safe there,” Carol said. “Probably.”

“The Sandbox is the most secure SHIELD location on the planet.” Fury sat and folded his hands on the table. “So, do we have any idea what just happened?”

“I’d say that you didn’t account for the fact that you’re literally trying to harness cosmic energy,” Tony muttered.

“And you lied to us,” Steve added. His brows were drawn together as he glared at Fury. “You weren’t just developing this for interstellar travel. Stark did a little more digging – you were going to
use it like Hydra used it, to make weaponry.”

“The universe is a scary place,” Fury said. “It’s like I said. Earth needs to be able to defend itself. But the point is that we didn’t anticipate it responding like it did. It’s never reached peak levels before, and until we know why it did, we’re going to isolate it.”

“It might not be the Tesseract,” Thor said. “But it is of the same star-stuff, and the energy it draws upon is the same. There is no reason it would not have a will of its own. And I know how you feel on the matter, Tony Stark—“ for Tony had rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh at the mention of this “—but my brother has attested to that.”

“You are welcome to try it out if you need further proof.” Sif gave Tony a very cool look, and he threw up his hands.

“Fine, fine.”

Natasha leaned forward on the table. “So… what are our next steps?”

“Loki is still alive. This much I know for certain,” Sif replied. The spells were strained, but there, and they would not be if he had died. “So there is a chance, a very good chance, that Jane lives also. Our focus should be on bringing them back.”

“Perhaps they will be within Heimdall’s sight,” Thor said. “And can simply call for his aid.”

Something nagged at Sif’s mind, something on the tip of her tongue. “I think if they could have, they would have already,” she said slowly. “There is a thought that I cannot quite grasp. Perhaps in more time I will be able to recapture it.”

“We’ll work out what happened,” Bruce said. “There were stars visible through that portal. I’m guessing you had security footage running?” Fury glanced at Carol, who nodded.

“I can get you that footage,” she said. “And if it’s space we need to deal with, I’ve got some experience in that.”

“The Captain is our liaison between SHIELD’s earthbound operations and those of SWORD,” Fury explained. “Our orbital division.”

“Let’s just say I’ve got some unique skills.” Carol smiled a little. “You’re thinking about analyzing the star patterns visible to see if you can plot a location?”

“At least to give us somewhere to start.” Bruce shrugged. “I’m probably going to leave it up to actual astronomers, but it’s an idea.”

“Give me a couple days,” Tony said. “I’ll be anything you want, Banner.”

“I am afraid that I cannot remain here while this matter is investigated. I am Asgard’s queen, and with its king gone, I rule. My Realm needs me.” Sif glanced at Thor. “And Thor.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Fury began, but Sif held up a hand.

“Thor is a member of the royal family, and if something should happen to me, he will need to be able to step in and rule. Until Loki returns, Thor has agreed to remain in Asgard with me.”

Fury sighed. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“I’m afraid you do not, Director.”
“I will come to your aid if you call,” Thor said. “But my place right now is with Sif and Asgard.”

The conference went long into the night, and by the time they all agreed they’d done what they could and left the room, Sif could feel her head throbbing and her stomach rumbling. Thor was quiet as he walked beside her, and when they took the elevator up to the guest level, having agreed to stay the night before returning to Asgard, Sif caught him reflexively spinning Mjolnir in his palm.

“What is the matter?” she asked, though she thought she had an idea.

“You did not speak of the other reason I am returning to Asgard,” he said. “I understand your apprehension, but…”

“We know there is a traitor working against us in Asgard who is arming and aiding criminals here, using knowledge of the Tesseract and other things only a few people have access to,” Sif replied quietly. “And Fury has not proven himself trustworthy. He is not the one we seek, but I cannot bring myself to give him every detail of our plans, either.”

“You think this is connected somehow?”

“I do not know.” Sif locked the door of the guest suite behind them and leaned against it for a moment, taking a breath. The door was solid at her back, and with the world shifting like sand under her, it was comforting to feel something so sturdy. “But it cannot be ruled out.”

“I do not like this,” Thor rumbled, his voice like low thunder in the distance. “I do not like not knowing who to place my trust in.”

“Neither do I, Thor.” Sif sighed; she felt Loki’s absence keenly now, and not only because of her heart. He was reviled by some for his furtive ways, but he would have known what to do in a heartbeat, while she could only use what she’d learned from him as best she could. “But we do what we must.”

* *

“We do not often admit this, Director, so listen closely – you were right. They reacted exactly as you said they would.”

Fury stared round at them, because it was fun to make the Council sweat for a change. They’d fucked up, and they knew it, and they knew the only way to start damage control was to admit it. A few were probably pissed off by his behavior right now, but frankly, he wanted to savor the moment.

“I knew they’d be angry when they found out about it, even after we explained our reasons,” he said. “But that’s not important anymore. We’ve caused a goddamn interplanetary incident; the Queen is returning to Asgard with Thor to consider her options, and that means she’s stopping trade and canceling all diplomatic engagements until the current crisis is resolved, and she’s expecting us to contribute to that.”

“How?” One of the Council members shifted, obviously uncomfortable.

“Well, for starters I think I’ll give them SWORD’s data—“

“That’s classified, Director—“

“—and tell them what we’ve been doing up there, what we think we’re monitoring. It’s worth noting that we did detect a deep-space disturbance that coincides with our cube’s activation, so wherever the King and Dr. Foster have ended up, it’s a long way from either our home or Asgard. For all we
know, they’re dead.”

“The Queen insists they’re not.”

“She insists that the King isn’t. But that could change.” Fury collected his tablet and folders. “We decided four years ago that space was a deadly place, Councilors, and that’s why we started this project. This is the fruit it’s borne.”

“You wanted this, Director.”

“I did. But that ship’s sailed, and now we’re going to have to collect the flotsam. I’m going to handle it from here, Councilors,” he said. “Because frankly, I don’t fucking trust you all to make decisions when you’re not here seeing what the situation on the ground is.”

Without giving them a chance to respond, Fury shut down the channel and left the comm room. The Council would be pissed at him, but at the moment, he didn’t really care. He had bigger problems to deal with, and while the Council always said that they were the only ones who could see the big picture and Fury wasn’t working with all the information, Fury tended to think that was bullshit and they had no idea how to deal with the fact that because of the actions of the Council (and his own as well, he wasn’t blameless in this) the reigning monarch of their first and only interplanetary ally was now missing.

“What’s the situation, Coulson?” he asked as he walked out into the bigger Logistics and Operations area. It was designed like an amphitheater, reminiscent of the bridge of the Helicarrier, with banks of terminals in long arcs and the front of the room covered in constantly updating displays. Until they knew to go elsewhere, this was where Fury planned to operate. SWORD sent their information down to Harstad, and the cube was here, and he figured that their best bet of finding and rescuing Loki and Jane would start or end here.

“It’s bad, sir.” Coulson handed him a slender black file. “That’s all the telemetry we’ve been able to deduce so far, using SWORD’s readings and likely projections based on visible phenomena around the time of the cube’s activation. Sir… how did it activate at all? We had it connected to only nominal power.”

“Hell if I know, Coulson. We’d hoped for more time to study how the Tesseract drew power so we could replicate it and use it to charge this cube. It shouldn’t have been able to do what it did. Was there any indication that the King’s magic influenced it?”

“His statements before the incident indicated that his magic was completely suppressed. No tests run, but there were no readings indicating the particular kind of unnamed particles associated with his magic. The way he talks, these things are sentient. Maybe it… decided it wanted to do what it did.”

“It’s a cube. We made it from glass and energy, Coulson.”

“I know, sir.”

Fury glanced over; Coulson’s tone was placid enough, but he knew his right hand well enough to know when there was disapproval there, and he could hear it now.

“Like it or not, this is how we’ve gotten started.”

“I’m just not sure we’re prepared for what’s behind the door we’ve opened,” Coulson said quietly. “But when all you can do is go forward…”

“…you deal or you die,” Fury finished. “Let’s hope we don’t die. The Earth doesn’t have anyone
Thor swallowed hard as he pulled Lena’s stuffed cat out of her bag and brought it over to where she lay in the bed he and Jane should have been sharing. He would probably come later and curl up in bed with her, wrap her up in his arms and hold her until he could find sleep himself. But right now, he was just trying to get her to get some rest. Like her mother, Lena was cranky when she hadn’t had enough sleep.

“Mommy has gone on a trip, beloved,” he said, sitting on the bed beside her with his long legs stretched out along the edge. “She wasn’t expecting to go, but she took your uncle Loki with her.”

“Uncle Loki goed too?”

“He went, Lena. Yes.”

“But Mama didn’t say goodbye!”

“It was so quickly, little one. I know she wanted to, and I know she loves you very much. As do I.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her soft hair. “But now you must sleep. It is a long flight to Norway, is it not? Surely you are tired, and tomorrow you are coming to Asgard with me.”

“To see Grandmama?”

“Yes. She is going to be so happy to see you, beloved. But now it’s bedtime.”

“Bedtime, Daddy.” Lena closed her eyes and pulled her cat closer as she rolled into Thor’s side. “Sleep now.”

He allowed himself a moment of basking in the small, comforting warmth of his daughter before he tried to get up. “I have to go take care of something, little one, but—“

“No.” Lena’s fists tightened on his shirt. “Mommy goed. Don’t want you to go too.”

Thor pressed his lips together so the sob in his chest didn’t escape. Their daughter was already upset enough, and he would not be the one to upset her more. “I’ll stay then, Lena,” he whispered, gathering her up into his arms and kicking off his boots. He pulled the covers up around Lena’s shoulders and settled against the hard headboard of the bed.

“All night?”

“Of course.” He tucked his daughter under his chin and closed his eyes, feeling tears sting them and seep through his lashes. “I’ll stay all night.”

*  

The Avengers stood in a loose circle around Sif and Thor. It was cold and blustery, and Sif shivered a little even under her fur-lined cloak. Pregnancy had apparently brought on both periods where she could not cool herself off short of standing in one of the palace’s cold storage rooms (which she had done) and periods where she could not keep herself warm enough. But she was a queen right now, and so straightened her back and drew the edges of her cloak around her.

“I am sorry for my abrupt departure,” she told Darcy. Their much-belaguered ambassador had
arrived last night with Lena and had, by her appearance, been up half the night. She shivered in between Bruce and Tony and pushed her hair out of her face with a gloved hand.

“I get it,” she said. “I’m really sorry, Sif. Er, my lady—“

“It’s all right.” Sif held up a hand, and stepped forward to take Darcy’s. “I am, thankfully, not my husband. You are a friend to us, Darcy, and you are a friend to Jane Foster.”

Darcy’s face fell, and though she looked down quickly Sif could see her tears. “Can you bring Jane back?” she asked, her voice barely audible over the wind. Sif, her heart aching, raised Darcy’s chin with her fingertips.

“I will do everything in my power and the power of Asgard to bring Jane back with Loki. I swear it on my blood, my blade, and my crown. Have hope, Darcy Lewis. Where there is hope, there is always a chance.”

“You sure you want to go back to Asgard alone?” Steve asked her. “I imagine things there won’t be really smooth.”

If it had come from anyone else, Sif would have been annoyed at the implication that she couldn’t handle things herself, but Steve Rogers had shown that he was loyal and honest, and those were traits she respected. “I appreciate your concern,” she said gently, “But I am Queen of Asgard, and if the court does not want to heed my words purely because I am a woman, and a pregnant woman at that, then I will teach them the error of their ways.”

Steve smiled at her. “I don’t doubt that at all, Ma’am. Still…”

“If there is anything we need I will send word. I promise you.” Sif looked over her shoulder at Thor, who was going around and making his own goodbyes. “And if we discover anything, it shall be relayed to you.”

“Good luck, Ma’am.”

Thor came back to her, holding Lena, and Sif’s heart hurt to see her friend’s eyes reddened by tears once more. Even his normally garrulous daughter seemed quiet, clinging to her father’s neck. She did manage a smile at Sif, but it was watery and small.

Not wanting to dwell any longer, Sif turned her eyes skyward. “Heimdall,” she called. “Take us home.”
Bell's Theorem

Chapter Notes

Now we're going to catch up somewhat with Loki and Jane who, as you all recall, fell through a hole in space caused by the reproduction Tesseract. If you've been keeping up with snippet sunday posts on my [tumblr](https://example.com), you'll know that things don't go swimmingly, but here's the whole chapter. Enjoy!

Bell's Theorem; a no-go theorem that represents a division between quantum mechanics and the world as we know it. Put simply, Bell's Theorem states that "no physical theory of local hidden variables can ever reproduce all of the predictions of quantum mechanics".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He spun through space.

It was only relative to the open portal that he could tell he was spinning at all. He had other things on his mind, but it certainly didn’t help the panic or the visceral need to get back when the blood rushed to his head and clouded his ability to think. He tried to reach out with his magic, tried grab something to pull himself back, but he was too far away and moving with too much momentum now to stop, and after a minute he gave up. The stars blurred in his eyes as he passed them, but dimly, far away now, he could see the portal wink out.

That was it, then, Loki thought. He was alone out here—

No, not alone. Somewhere ahead (above?) of him, Jane floated in the void. If he still lived, he would make sure she did too. Willing himself onward, Loki flung his magic outward, finding Jane and pulling himself toward her.

He overshot at first, rocketing past her. She still moved feebly, and quickly he cast the same charm he put on himself. It was supposed to be used underwater, but, well, desperate times. He saw Jane shudder and take a deep breath, and start flailing. Reaching out with his magic again, Loki grabbed her as she went flying by, pulling her in. Her fingers fisted and flexed and fisted against his chest as she coughed.

“What the hell?” she screamed. Staring past her Loki could only see the void, strange lights and emptiness, and closed his eyes to stop himself from panicking even more.

“I am going to try something!” he shouted. “Hold tightly to me, Jane, I have only done this once and it was risky enough on solid ground!”

She grabbed on to the straps of his armor and Loki pulled her in, curling around her as he reached out with his magic in a huge push. He wasn’t sure this was going to work—the spell was designed to work with the same shadowed paths through the Branches that he used, and by the dim skies they were far beyond Yggdrasil now. But even with the breather spell there was no way they would be able to survive or find their way home drifting in space. Loki’s expanding magical bubble found solid ground and latched onto it like a grappling hook, pulling them in at terrific speed.
Twisting, Loki took the impact across his shoulders, skidding across the rocky ground until he came to a stop against an outcropping. For a moment they lay where they’d landed, breathing hard—the place, wherever they were, seemed to at least have some kind of atmosphere—until Jane sat up and scrambled off him. She managed to press, poke, and punch every one of his new wounds too, and Loki grunted in pain as he sat up and took in their new surroundings.

“What a charming place,” he muttered.

Jane was limping slightly but moving, which he took as a good sign. If she was well enough to let her agitation take over it meant that she wasn’t badly hurt, while the throbbing in his shoulders made him wonder if he could in fact lift anything over his head ever again.

An absurd notion, of course. He’d have to be able to lift his child, when he returned home.

That thought brought a fresh wave of fear and despair so strong that Loki had to close his eyes and let it wash over him a moment, because he was on a hunk of rock in the middle of space, so far away that even the slowly deepening marriage bond seemed stretched to breaking. He was thousands of miles away from Sif, he was not there to protect her, what if something--

“Loki, I don’t recognize any of these constellations, do you?”

Constellations? “Why are you asking about the stars,” he hissed as he climbed to his feet. “We have been catapulted across the known universe and your first instinct is to—“

“I’m an astrophysicist, where else am I supposed to look?” Jane crossed her arms and glared at him. “If I can figure out where we are, it’ll be easier to get us home. For that matter, can’t you just…teleport us to Earth or Asgard or somewhere?”

Loki gave her an incredulous look. “If the Bifrost is like to your highways, my paths are like… streets, alleyways, little used and out of the way. Right now, in this metaphor, we are literally off the map.” He passed a hand over his face and stalked past her to what he thought was a cliff but turned out to be the edge of a piece of rock, floating stationary in space. Rocks in a starry void, so far from home, and him a tiny speck, all that he had fought to reclaim in himself and all that he had done so incredibly insignificant now that his end was going to come here. He began talking, not really thinking, but did control and forethought really matter anymore? “We are on a rock in space and we have no way back, Jane Foster, and—“

There was a sharp stinging pain in his cheek and everything stopped dead for a moment. His panicked thoughts stilled, he could not speak for his mouth hanging open as he stared down at Jane, who crossed her arms again and stared fearlessly up at him. After a moment, Loki closed his mouth and turned away again, certainly not feeling at all ashamed.

“Right,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You were getting hysterical.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You were babbling. I never thought I’d hear that—“

“Yes, thank you, Jane Foster. I can think now.”
“Okay. Look, it’s… I’m in the same boat, okay? Thor and Lena are probably worried sick, and I’m worried about them. But I don’t think losing our heads is going to get us very far, so just… let’s just take a deep breath.”

She did exactly as she said and her breath shook, but when she let it out, they had both steadied somewhat. “Okay,” Jane said, “Let’s think: what doesn’t work?”

“I cannot reach the shadowed paths. And the spell I used to get us here from the void is… inexact. I could use it to move us to another large mass, a planet, but there would be no guarantee we could survive there or that we were even moving in the right direction.”

“And space is big when you’re searching for one planet,” Jane finished with a little smirk. “Okay, so those are out. What about the Bifrost?”

“Simple enough to test.” Loki peered up at the stars. “Heimdall,” he called authoritatively, “Open the Bifrost.”

Nothing happened, and he gave Jane a very pointed look. She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t start. Let’s just see what we’ve got here that we can use.”

“It’s a rock.”

“Just shut up and think, I know you’re good at that when you stop talking.”

All avenues exhausted, Loki looked around with a more calculating eye. When he did he paused, focusing on a set of stairs glowing with a strange, purple-white light.

“I do not remember seeing those before. Do you?”

“Nnno…” Jane stopped staring up at the stars and came to stand beside him. The stairs floated in space, unsupported; the effect was at once intimidating and alluring, and to Loki it was a statement, a glowing sign of an intelligent being. Jane seemed to have reached the same conclusion, and the idea that perhaps whoever was smart enough to create atmosphere on a barren rock and carve steps out of space itself ought to be approached with caution. She bit her lip, and the rock crunched as she shuffled her feet.

For his part, Loki was less torn. Through the spells he could, faintly, sense that Sif was in great distress, and if these stairs meant intelligent life it was possible they had some kind of transportation that might take them back. Thinking of Sif now made him more resolute.

“Any being capable of making this kind of structure is likely to have a way to send us home.”

“Or a way to vaporize us,” Jane muttered. “But I guess it’s our best shot.” She went to step forward but Loki pulled her back

“You are one of the least tedious people I know.” He stepped in front of her, for if there truly was danger he was quite a lot more durable than she was. He was impatient to get home (and even willing to forego the punishment Fury and his superiors deserved in favor of seeing to his wife’s well-being) but Jane had his loyalty, such as it was, and his brother’s heart, and Loki had a particular investment in both. “Stay behind me. I will do my best to keep you from harm.”

The stairs had seemed far apart when they’d first looked upon them to where even Loki was wondering if he’d have to do some undignified scrambling, but as they began ascending, it seemed that the climb was not so difficult. Loki kept count in his mind – fifty, a hundred, two hundred steps,
and still they climbed, twisting between floating rocks.

Jane put his thoughts into words. “Whoever it is certainly isn’t making this easy. If they’re trying to intimidate us, they’re doing a damn good job.”

“Then obviously they have stopped trying and started succeeding.”

“You’re more of a jerk when you’re stressed.” Jane reached out and touched his sleeve. “Look, up ahead. I think we’re finally at the top.”

Sure enough there seemed to be a broader platform ahead, a cleft in the rock leading to what looked like a broad, roughly circular space with a single outcropping in the center, surrounded by glowing lights. Their footsteps on the ground seemed unnaturally loud, and the closer they got to the illuminated plinth, the greater the inexplicable cold dread in his belly grew.

“We’ve been expecting you.”

A figure seemed to melt out of the shadows of the rock wall around them. It was sexless, hooded and cloaked in strange fabrics. At his elbow, Jane drew in a breath.

“How?” she asked, before Loki could say anything. “How did you know we were coming?”

*It may have been all those stairs,* Loki thought, but he had the sense that this was not what the hooded figure was talking about.

“We have our ways. You reek of the Tesseract’s energy, and yet…” the figure came closer, and a horrible snuffling noise came from under its hood, as though it was actually sniffing them. “It is corrupted.”

“What a good nose you have,” Loki answered irritably. “But as truly, ah, grand as the view from this place is, we require transport to our home, and—“

“You are not going home.”

“What?”

The hooded figure spread its many-fingered hands, and Loki fought to keep his carefully polite expression on his face. “We have been waiting for you for so long, Loki of Asgard. *He* has been waiting for you.”

A chill went down his spine, and Loki’s tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. At his elbow, Jane spoke up.

“What?”

“Be silent,” Loki hissed, but the figure was laughing.

“He who summoned you here, of course. One cube unreachable and one cube impure but it matters not to *he* who will command all.”

“I am a king,” Loki snapped, “I am commanded by no one.”

“If this guy is so all-powerful, why isn’t he the one talking to us?” Jane crossed her arms, and while it was probably unwise to provoke this… thing and its master, Loki wanted - needed - to know too. He had a growing, sick feeling in his stomach that told him he probably already knew the answer, but like peeling back the bandages to look at a wound, he needed to confirm that it would hurt.
The creature seemed affronted. “He does not bandy words with those unworthy of hearing—“

“Enough.”

The hooded creature fell immediately silent, bowing and backing away. What they had taken for a plinth of rock now began to glow, and Loki could see that it was a metal chair, more like to a throne, and that it was occupied.

“My lord, you need not concern yourself,” the creature began, but a broad purple hand rose up and halted its words.

“I have waited long enough to meet this one who calls himself King of the Nine Realms,” the new speaker said. “I will wait no longer.” There was the scrape of metal on metal, the crunch of the rock under booted feet, and the trickle of cold fear down his spine turned into a river.

*What a thrice-cursed fool am I*, Loki thought. *I knew, I knew, and yet here I am.*

“I am Thanos of Titan. I would apologize for the lack of hospitality offered by the Other, but I think we have far more pressing business, no?” Thanos smiled his horrible smile, and Loki gripped Jane’s arm tightly.

“Do not approach him, do not say anything,” he hissed quickly, but Thanos interrupted them with a laugh.

“Not even rendering an introduction before you try to leave? That’s very rude. Not at all how you were brought up, Loki of Asgard… or is it Jotunheim?”

Loki stiffened. “I am King of Asgard,” he said coldly. “I think that speaks for itself.”

“I suppose you were raised by a thief and thus see stealing a throne as nothing of consequence. But we can discuss that at length later on. You,” and he turned his smile upon Jane, who shook a little but stood her ground. “You are also known to me, Jane Foster, for you are the one who seeks to open the stars for your little world. You are a true gem of brilliance in an otherwise unremarkable race. It will be a pity to see you die.”

*Doctor* Jane Foster. And I am not going to die.”

Thanos laughed again. “You *are* spirited! Perhaps humanity is not as weak as I have been lead to believe… but my information on the matter has been from a biased source.”

He didn’t sound very concerned about it, and though part of Loki whispered that he ought to try and ferret out who it was passing information to Thanos – he had an idea that the person inside Asgard’s palace and the person telling Thanos of Earth were one and the same – the rest of him knew that he had more pressing problems right now. “Not a wise course of action, really…”

“And I suppose you feel you would be a better judge? You, who have become so attached?” Thanos stepped forward, and Loki had to clench his fist hard enough to feel the sting of his nails in his palm to keep from shrinking away. Jane shifted backward a little bit, but that wasn’t unexpected (and was probably smarter). “You call yourself lord of a realm above them, but I have watched you, King. You court their words, their accolades… you bask in their attention. You have been declawed, and it is a shame, because you could be so much more.”

“I have heard of you before this day, Thanos of Titan,” Loki said. He did not like the way this was going; Thanos’ words had planted a seed of doubt and he struggled against its strangling hold. “You’ll forgive me if I do not put much stock in your words.”
“I do not forgive, Asgardian.” Thanos changed; the smile did not leave his face, but there was a new and menacing light in his eyes. “As you will find out for yourself. Bind him.”

Suddenly there were more beings like the hooded figure melting out of the shadows, purple lights shifting crazily and making it difficult to focus upon them, starlight glittering on the gold of their armor and weaponry. One had a wicked-looking set of manacles, barbs pointing inward, and it cackled as it advanced on him.

“What of the human?”

Thanos waved a hand, turning his back to sit once more in his throne. “Kill her. She will not be the first and certainly not the last, but this business ought to begin with someone so illustrious. You see, King and Doctor, I have been given a great task. Both of you would only be in my way if I left you to your own devices, but you, Loki… you will prove useful. Your realm has something I need, and you will be the one to deliver it into my hand.”

One of the creatures made a grab for Jane and she jerked away, bumping into his side. Loki didn’t even notice. “I do not like to let go of things that are mine.”

“Another lesson for you to learn, then. What will it take for you to do what you must do? Shall I end the lives of every being on Earth, or Asgard? No, I think not, for you care little for the rabble… but you are not without your pressure points. Who will it be, Asgardian? Your father, as he wanders the stars? Your mother, who spins as though she can truly hold destiny in her hands? Or perhaps… your brother, the one to whom you have foolishly given half your heart?” Beside him, Jane made a little noise like a gasp, but Thanos ignored it. “Or your wife, keeper of the other half—”

Something in Loki snapped, and he was surging forward before the knife was even fully materialized in his hand. The creatures screeched in alarm and he felt disgusting, many-jointed hands grab at him, but he pushed through the ring and planted his foot, bringing his knife around in a reverse grip so he could bring all the power in his torso to bear as he rammed it straight into Thanos’ chest. But almost casually, the titan grabbed his wrist in one giant hand, pulling it slowly to the side so he could lean in and fix Loki with the full weight of his regard. Hot shame followed the icy terror in Loki’s gut, for not even years of ruling beside the most courageous woman in the universe could put a stop to his cowardice. He let the knife drop as Thanos squeezed his wrist hard.

“You’re a valuable tool, Asgardian,” he whispered. “But even the best tools can be broken.”

Behind him he could hear the crunch of rock and lots of chittering and grunts as Jane fought against the creatures trying to grab her and kill her. She had no weapons, but she was putting up a better fight than he was. Despair filled him then, for he would die here in space, far away from Sif and his brother and his child, because he was a coward and the veneer laid down over the course of his rule thus far was only that, a smokescreen for his true nature—

“Loki--Loki! Damn it, get us out of here!”

“Do you feel powerless?” Thanos asked him. “You have scrabbled and fought your entire life for every scrap of respect you have now and here in the black of space it matters as much as an ant matters to a star. You are insignificant.

“But I can make you more. All you have to do is accept.”

What shamed him more than anything was that for a moment, just a fleeting moment, he almost agreed.
Then he bared his teeth and pulled on his magic. There was no strange black stone to block it here, and Thanos’ fist closed on the empty space where Loki’s wrist had been. Loki rematerialized long enough to grab Jane from where she was still struggling against those trying to hold her, and then they were back on the rock they’d landed on at first, the shouts of the creatures far above them echoing strangely. Neither of them stopped to think about how sound echoed in space.

“Hold on,” Loki told her, throwing his magic out in all directions again. He had expended a lot, but for saving himself and Jane, he would have to make what he had left work for his purposes. Jane twisted her hands into the straps of his armor. At the edges of his perception, he could sense something, some small mass flying toward them. A comet, some celestial body? He hoped not.

“Where are we going?”

“I do not know,” he said, gathering himself, focusing on whatever it was that was passing so near to them. “Far away from here. We may end up on a planet, or we may end up in space. Take a deep breath—now!”

Closing his eyes, he flung his magic out, and all around them was black once more.

*

The glow of the ship’s jets was distant but still visible against the empty space around his seat, and Thanos watched as they flared and dimmed as the ship made its jump out of this particularly dangerous sector.

Behind Thanos, the Other shifted uneasily. “That was the ship of—“

“I know who it was,” Thanos snapped, then made himself be calm again. “But two flies or six, it makes no difference. We proceed.”

“What shall I tell our other guest?”

“Let him wait. He has been remarkably quiet lately… perhaps he has finally learned his lesson.”

“Do I give him the…”

“Not yet. I still have hope for our dear king to come to his senses as well.” Thanos eyed the Other. “The rest of our preparations I leave to your discretion and that of our friend in the Realm Eternal.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The other left down the stairs with his minions, and Thanos smiled to himself. Sooner or later, Loki would come back to him, this he knew. All it would take was time, and as he looked at his reflection in a rough-hewn emerald stone, he knew he had all the time he would need.

*

“I am Groot.”

“No kiddin’. That was flarking reckless, Quill, even for you.”

“Airlock sealed and pressurized.” Gamora’s voice was cool, and as the streaks of hyperjump passed them by, Peter glanced at her.

“Cutting it pretty close,” he said.
She made a noise of assent, but didn’t seem inclined to talk about it further, so he let it drop. “Lucky for our two new friends, though. If we hadn’t been out here, they’d be dead by now.”

“Let’s hope they’re grateful for the assist.” Peter undid his harness and climbed out of the cockpit. “I’m going to get Drax and get them to the med suite. Computer says they’re alive, but they’ll need help. Space is like Australia, Gamora.”

Faintly, he could hear Rocket mutter what’s Australia? behind him, and shook his head.

“Everything’s out to get us,” he said, and slapped Drax’s door. “Need a hand, Drax! We’ve got company.”

When they’d pulled the two limp, cold beings into the small medical suite on board the ship and hooked them up, Peter tapped the old screen made cloudy with scratches and peered at the readouts. “One human!” he crowed, pointing at the brunette woman. “And one… huh. What’s a Jotun?”

*

Voices swam around her, muddy and obscured by some strange buzzing, and Jane squeezed her eyes against the blinding light that was trying valiantly to stab her brain through her retinas.

“…coming around… get in here…”

“…vitals all over…”

“…picked up from his space, Quill, you know what that means…”

“…all of you… needs rest, not…”

“What does that mean?” Jane tried to ask, but it came out as wuhzzahmee and she coughed as the voices faltered.

“This one is glad you are waking,” a soothing voice told her. “But do not try to speak just yet. You are lucky to be alive at all.”

Jane cracked open one eye to see a smiling green woman above her. “Huh?”

“Here.” The green woman turned away briefly and Jane saw metal panels above her before strong, slender hands propped her up and placed a plasticine cup at her lips. “It is water, enhanced with nutrients. Drink, you will feel better; the cold of space has not frozen you through, but it was a near thing.”

Jane tried to lift a hand to tilt the cup back, felt her palm only flop along the thin blanket covering the mattress, and just let the green woman give her small sips of the liquid at a time. It tasted oddly syrupy, but she did feel better the longer she drank it, and by the end she was sitting up herself and holding the cup. The little bit of liquid in it quivered as her hand shook, but after taking stock of herself and deciding she didn’t actually feel like dying just yet, Jane decided she’d taking the shakiness and worry about it only if it didn’t go away.

“See?” The green woman smiled at her again, and Jane smiled back.

“I’m Doctor Jane Foster,” she said. “I’m from Earth.”

“Yes, Peter Quill was very excited. This one is called Mantis.”
“I was with someone—”

“He is right below you, not yet awake. He was in worse shape when we picked you both up.”

“That’s surprising.” Jane stretched and felt the stiffness that only came with sitting for long periods of time. “How long have we been out?”

“We picked you up two hours ago—oh, be careful,” Mantis said, her antennae shifting forward in alarm as Jane began trying to swing her legs over the edge of the bunk. “You should probably not be moving—”

“Just don’t let me kick Loki in the face. He’s the reason we’re alive, it’d be an awful way to repay him.” Mantis moved a metal cube under her searching feet and Jane balanced shakily on it as she climbed down to the deck and turned to look at Loki. He looked just as bad as she felt right now, pale enough to almost glow in the bright light.

“His vitals are stabilizing,” Mantis said, tapping a display beside Loki’s head, “And he was never truly close to death.”

“That’s good.” Jane steadied herself on the bunk, took a breath, and then tried to take a few steps. They were wobbly, and Mantis seemed poised to catch her, but the annoyance at being treated like a fragile doll kicked in and Jane straightened as she took a few more steps out into the narrow corridor. At last, Mantis dropped her hands and they walked for a minute in silence.

“You are remarkably resilient for a human,” she said.

Jane sighed; she’d gotten used to the lack of commentary on her mortality. “We’re not really that fragile.”

“So it would seem. Come this way, Jane.” Mantis waved her hand over a panel and the door just ahead of them slid open, revealing a streaked star-field. “There are some people you must meet.”

Some people turned out to mean the strangest group Jane had ever encountered. There was another green woman, Gamora; a green man tattooed in red, Drax; a walking, talking, bad-tempered raccoon, Rocket; a tree named, apparently, Groot; and Peter Quill, who got very excited when she said she had come from Earth, to the point that Gamora gave him a significant look.

“Move it along, Quill.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Peter Quill put his hands on the table. “Look, I know you’re probably feeling like a planet hit you, but we’ve got to ask you a few questions…”

*

Based on her own experiences and what she had learned (mostly from Peter Quill, who seemed capable of talking a really long time once the questions were out of the way), Jane had formulated the hypothesis that it might be beneficial to everyone’s continued health and well-being if she happened to be present when Loki finally woke up. So when a display window popped up on the cockpit screens and Quill said cheerfully, “Look, everyone, Sleeping Beauty’s waking up!” Jane was out of her seat and walking swiftly down the corridor before anyone else could leave the cockpit. Her head pounded despite the electrolyte-laden drinks that Mantis had been giving her every time she finished one, but that was less important than making sure a confused alien sorcerer didn’t blast a hole in the ship.

That, and whatever Thanos had been saying to him before they’d made their escape had obviously
ratted him. Given that Loki tended to project an air of cultivated disdain, she doubted that being confronted by a vulgar talking raccoon upon awakening would help whatever mental tailspin he’d been put into.

As she walked into the room Loki was just sitting up, cradling his head in his hands like it was made of glass. “Loki?” Jane said carefully. “How are you feeling?”

He peered up at her for a long time as though trying to decide if she was real, then cleared his throat. “Brittle. Very brittle. Water?”

“Oh—“

“Is he really awake? He’s not dead?”

“I am… Groot?”

Jane closed her eyes. Please don’t freak out, she thought desperately at Loki, and opened her eyes to Rocket at the food of the bunk, arms crossed and a skeptical expression on his face. Loki was staring flatly back. His eyes then moved from Rocket to Groot, leaning over so he could look in through the doorway, and the rest of the crew who had taken up positions around the walking tree so they could peer in as well.

“I was wrong,” Loki said slowly. “I am still unconscious, and this is all a dream born of a lack of air to my brain.”

“You’re awake,” Jane told him. Loki put his head in his hands again.

“I do not want to be.”

“Well, you are,” Peter announced, squeezing in past Groot’s lower limbs. “So you’re going to slurp down this delicious nutrient drink and then you’re going to answer some questions before you faint or something.”

Loki drew himself up to the most regal position possible. “I am Loki, King of Asgard. I do not faint.”

“Really? Out of everything I just said, that’s what you’re focusing on?”

Loki’s expression was a reasonable approximation of his sly, snide look, and Jane almost felt bad that Quill missed it, leaning back to listen to something Gamora was saying. “Better than focusing on the vermin.”

“Be nice,” Jane hissed, but she said it knowing full well that only Sif or his mother could say that and make it stick. “They saved our lives.”

“Who’re you callin’ vermin—“

“Easy there, big guy.” Quill stepped up closer, putting a hand on Rocket’s shoulder and pushing him back a little. “You’re going to have to wait to show him the error of his ways. We’re back.”

The ship swung around a huge structure in space; it revolved slowly, but even if it had been stationary it would have been difficult to parse the shape of it.

“Is that a giant head,” Jane muttered.

“Give the lady a prize.” Rocket looked back at her. “It’s the severed head of a Celestial. Welcome to Knowhere.”
Loki, who had not touched the electrolyte drink Mantis had pushed into his hands before he could protest, raised an eyebrow. “Nowhere?”

“No. Knowhere.”

“Where?”

“Are you deaf?”

Loki eyed the contents of the cup again and took a drink at last, and Jane could see the wheels turning, the calculations of every person around him churning out data behind his eyes. “I’m beginning to wonder.”

They came alongside and docked at what looked like it had once been an auditory channel. The inside, blissfully, had been covered over with metal plating, and once the airlock they entered into cycled through, they were let out into a broad, noisy chamber filled with the rustling and raised voices of thousands of beings.

Jane paused to stare out. She’d thought Asgard and its attendant crowds had been strange and amazing, but they paled in comparison to what she saw now. What kind of planet yielded an armored, six-limbed alien, for example? Or a tall, spindly being carrying on in a chittery, high-pitched language? She knew that there had to be more cultures, more knowledge represented here than in any city on Earth, and this was only in one part of space! Jane felt herself grinning.

“Amazing,” she breathed. Walking beside her along the raised catwalk, Loki snorted.

“You would think so.”

“Don’t pretend you’re not interested,” Jane shot back. “I saw your ears perk up the moment we walked in. You’d spend hours in here poking around and snooping and you know it.”

Loki seemed to relax for a moment, his eyes scanning the room, but then they shifted. Jane knew him well enough to see the flicker of pain and longing before it was buried. “But that’s not why we’re here,” he said coolly. “We must find a way home.”

“Keep up, campers,” Peter called. “Not everyone here is as warm n’ fuzzy as we are.”

The catwalk ended in a broad ramp that led to another level of the station. Sitting on the ramp was a dog, dressed in an old cosmonaut-style suit, its tail wagging. “Reality does not bear out your words, Peter Quill,” Loki said. “There is a fuzzy beast right here.”

*I am no beast, strange man.*

Given the rest of their day it was no surprise that Loki didn’t react as much as anyone probably thought he would. Jane, though, still twitched at least.

“Did the dog just…”

“You get used to it,” Gamora murmured. “Hello, Cosmo.”

*It is good to be seeing you again, comrades. And to strangers, I am Cosmo, head of security of Knowhere station. Telepathy is result of happy accident.*

“I would ask how this is possible, but…”

*Now is not time. Come this way, please.*
They filed into a room that looked like it might have been the conference room in some B-grade sci-fi flick; the table was scratched, the chairs didn’t match, but Jane’s eyes were caught up in the view from the windows.

“We’re not even in the same galaxy as Earth or Asgard, are we?” she asked quietly. Peter Quill’s reflection looked at her.

“No,” he said as the others took their seats. “We’re not. But we’ve got some questions for you two.”

“We have no time for this,” Loki said. He did not sit but stood at one end of the table. “Jane Foster and I require transportation to Asgard. With what we have learned here we must return and make preparations to defend—“

“I don’t care.”

“I beg your pardon—“

“Look, I get that you’re some kind of king… or maybe you actually are a trickster deity, out here you can’t be sure about anything like that… but you’re not going to just waltz in here and order me and my team around.”

“Or you’re both liars. Either way, we found you in a very unsavory neighborhood,” Gamora said. “And considering the kind of people we are, for us to say that means something.”

“What do you mean, ‘what kind of people you are’?” Jane asked.

“Is it not obvious?” Loki made a flicking gesture with his fingers. “They are all outlaws.”

“That better not be judgment I’m hearing from you. Your name is Loki.”

“Guilty as charged, though.” Rocket leaned back to look up at Groot, who had squeezed himself in by the door. “What have we racked up, buddy? Theft, assault…”

“I am Groot.”

“Oh yeah.” Rocket got a very dreamy look in his eyes. “Vandalism.”

Jane jumped as Gamora put a rather large sword up on the table. Peter gave the green woman a fond look. “Our lady here has more than a dozen counts of murder. And Drax…”

“Revenge,” the green man said. “It makes me… short tempered.” Based on the snorts from the others around the table, and a soft I am Groot, Jane figured that this was an understatement.

“Everyone on Knowhere is wanted for something, or would be a pretty, shiny Christmas gift for the right people. Which is what we want to talk to you two about.” Quill tilted his chin up at Loki.

“You’ve figured it out.”

“You know we were with Thanos.”

Across the table from her, Jane saw Gamora’s eyes tighten just slightly. But her voice was cool as she said, “You get why we’re a little on edge around you, then. You were with Thanos, and you got away. So did you really escape, or—“

“—were we let go.” Loki nodded slowly. “While I commend you on your paranoia, it is slowing us down. We need to return to—“
“—look, pal, even if I knew where Asgard was, I wouldn’t take you there.”

“I am King.” Loki crossed his arms. “The reward for the safe return of Asgard’s king to its throne would be…”

He trailed off significantly. Rocket leaned forward to fill the silence. “Would be what?”

“Substantial.”

“Reward or not, we need to know what Thanos wanted with you.”

Now it was Loki’s turn to tell; he brought his hands forward, picking at the palm of a hand. “Nothing we were agreeable to,” he replied smoothly.

“He said he had some task he had to complete,” Jane added. “Before he ordered me killed.”

Quill and Gamora exchanged a look; Drax made a sound deep in his throat that might have been a growl.

“Well, that can’t mean any flarking good,” Rocket said. “Anything else?”

Jane had never been a very good liar, but she called upon all her faculties now. “I don’t remember. The part about nearly dying kind of clouded everything up after that.”

“Mantis, Cosmo,” Peter Quill said after a moment, “Is there anywhere we can put Jane and Loki up for a while? We need some time.”

Sure thing, Star-Lord.

Mantis rose gracefully, gesturing with her head and hand. “Please follow us.”

“No,” Loki said, and Jane tensed. Whatever good manners his mother had taught him, Loki was still infamously stubborn, and he had already dug his heels in. “We need to return to Asgard, to see that it is ready should Thanos decide to move—”

“And we need to decide if what you want and what we want are copacetic.”

“Come on, Loki,” Jane said. “We need to talk about what happened, too.”

Loki studied her for a moment, then nodded, his jaw tense. “Very well.”

You are stubborn man, Cosmo said as they walked along another corridor in the station. This one was apparently just within one of the orbits of the station’s skull; a huge glass window let in starlight, and the shifting lights of spaceships coming in to dock. This will not help you.

“It hasn’t hurt so far.”

“You know you can just think and Cosmo will hear you,” Mantis told him.

“I think I will continue to speak aloud.”

Stubborn, Cosmo repeated. But you are astrophysicist, Doctor Jane?

“That’s right.” Jane studied the cosmonaut suit. Up close, it didn’t look like a costume at all. “Were you one of the dogs the Russians sent up into space?”
Cosmo barked. *Very smart! You would be better liked if you were pleasant like her, King Loki. You are smart but you are also not very nice.*

“I am not a nice person,” Loki said archly. “It has gotten me quite far in life.”

Jane sighed. “Sadly, he’s not lying about that.”

Mantis and Cosmo stopped by a door. “Here is your room,” the green woman said. “We have limited space here, so you must share.”

“We’ll be fine with that, thank you,” Jane said before Loki could open his mouth. Mantis smiled at her.

“Let us know if you require anything,” she said, and then she and Cosmo left.

The room was small, and despite that she’d been unconscious for who knew how long, Jane sank gratefully down on one of the bunks and put her head in her hands. Loki paced the room like an animal, his annoyance coming out now.

“Fools, the lot of them,” he muttered. If she unfocused her eyes she could see a growing nimbus of green light around his fists, and began to worry for the safety of their room. The pacing seemed to help at least, but it was anxiety-inducing; Jane watched him for a while, then caught him when he passed by her and pulled him down to sit beside her. If he called anyone friend it was her, Jane knew. She was someone safe. That was why she could tell that he was afraid without having to pull it out of him.

“We need to return,” he said at last. “Sif…”

“She’ll be fine.” Jane smiled weakly and put a hand on his back, for his fears for his wife and unborn child were her own. “She’s got Thor around. He wouldn’t let anything happen to her or the baby.”

“That is hardly comforting.” But she felt his back relax slightly under her hand.

“We’ll find a way home.”

“We have no choice.”

“Right. Thanos said he wanted something from Asgard.” Jane took a breath, and tried her best to put the ache in her heart aside for now. Thor and Lena were safe at least, she told herself, and though she missed them she knew they would both be all right. “I’m going to guess it’s the Tesseract?”

“I would guess you are correct. But there are certain other treasures in the Vault that Thanos would find most useful.” Green light crackled around his hands again and Loki closed his eyes until it dimmed. “There are things you must know, Jane Foster. You will want to ask questions, but do not. I do not know how much time we have.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, questions and commentary are welcome in my askbox on Tumblr!
Gravitational Lensing

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long periods between updates, everyone. My life has been hectic lately, so I won't be updating regularly for a while yet... but I'm going to do my best to not have it be months. Class will be over in a few weeks so I'll have more time, hopefully!

*gravitational lensing*: if a massive object is situated between the astronomer and a distant target object with appropriate mass and relative distances, the astronomer will see multiple distorted images of the target.

Through the slowing gap in the Observatory’s wall she could already see the retinue of guards and peers that had come to the edge of the realm, but as she stepped out of the Bifrost’s light and heat and into an Asgard that felt colder than ever, Sif did not want to face them just yet. Neither did Thor, it seemed, for he shifted Lena in his arms and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

Heimdall slid his sword out of the pedestal and stared down at them both. “I searched thousands of suns and to the ends of the tiniest twigs on great Yggdrasil, but wherever the King and Jane Foster are, they are beyond my Sight. Forgive me, my queen and my prince. I have failed you both.”

Words caught in her throat, but Thor stepped forward. “There is nothing to forgive, Heimdall. We cannot ask you to do what is not possible.”

Sif found her voice at last. “They have left Yggdrasil far behind. If they cannot find a way home, we will devise one.”

“Of this I have no doubt.” Heimdall’s lips twitched in what was almost a smile as they walked past, out into the waiting storm.

“Grandmama!” Lena leaned back away from her father and kicked her feet until Thor had to let her down or risk dropping her onto the twinkling crystal bridge. She caught her balance and then made a waddling beeline for Frigga, who knelt and held her arms out for her granddaughter.

“Hello there, little Lena!” she said, scooping up the little girl and bringing her to her hip. “You grow strong and beautiful, just like your parents.”

“Thanks!”

Frigga gave them both a look that they knew well – one that meant *we will talk later* - as she mounted her palfrey and waited for Edwik to hand Lena up to her. When she had started off at a sedate trot, Edwik brought over Sif and Thor’s horses, and the whole group rode off.

It was a much slower ride than usual, and Sif was glad, letting her horse have a loose rein and half-closing her eyes as they trotted along the bridge. The air was heavy with the scent of autumn, and as they passed over parts of the city she could look down and see carts laden with the harvest coming through the streets. Soon they would start the round of festivals and gatherings and blessings that was the season between harvest and Yule; Sif had a whole wardrobe full of gowns made to fit her ever-expanding figure for it, but she did not have her husband beside her, and while she could manage
well enough without him he had certainly made it easier.

Once inside the palace, the group split; Frigga took Lena off to Fensalir to play in the few hours of sunlight left, most of the courtiers and guards made off for the public levels of the palace and the training sands, and Sif and Thor continued on to the throne room. On the way, they passed Gungnir, poised and ready on its pedestal. Sif eyed it, but relegated dealing with that for later on.

“Leave us,” she called as they ascended the stairs to the main part of the throne room. At the imperious tone of her voice, the courtiers hastened to obey, and when the doors had been shut behind the skirts of the last curious lady, Sif and Thor looked at each other.

“They will want you to take the throne in your brother’s stead, but I will not step aside. The Accords do not say I must, and unless my…” she choked on the word, but said it through ground teeth, “…condition advances too far, I will refuse with everything in me.”

“I would not dream of it, Sif.” Thor gave her an odd look, and Sif passed a hand over her face before turning to look up at the throne. She would sit upon it tomorrow as Queen, knowing that one of the faces looking back at her was working against her.

“I am sorry, my friend,” she said quietly. “I do not mean to imply that you would do such a thing. But…”

Thor nodded when all Sif could do was wave a hand wordlessly. “I know.”

“I know you would probably wish to remain here with Lena…”

“She is perfectly safe with my mother. She’ll be all right.”

“And you?” The two of them walked over to the edge of the throne room, looking out over the city. Sif linked her arm with Thor’s as they climbed the stairs to the top of the bowl, thinking that it was not possible that she would only get more uncomfortable as time went on.

“I will be,” Thor replied after a moment. Sif tightened her hands on his arm. Jane had not partaken of that which would make her as long-lived as an Asgardian, and Sif knew that Thor wanted to treasure every moment he had with his love. To be separated from her like this was hard for him, the prince who wore his heart on his sleeve.

“We will find them,” she said. She hoped it sounded more certain than she felt.

*

In the morning, Sif woke and simply lay in bed with her eyes closed, breathing slowly, letting her thoughts run through her mind. She didn’t want to acknowledge them or the realm yet.

When she did open her eyes, she reached across the bed to touch the pile of pillows on Loki’s side. In her mind’s eye she could see him looking back at her sleepily, that little knowing smirk of his playing at the edges of his lips. There was never a line between his brows in the first moments after they woke, no masks or charades. There was only Loki and Sif and, lately, her stomach. Sif closed her eyes and rolled onto her side, pushing her face into the pillows. Ozone and parchment and leather…

But as soon as her handmaiden knocked, she was sitting up, one hand on her belly and the other running through her hair.

“My lady? Are you awake?”
“I am. Come in, Rida.” Sif stretched her back while her handmaiden bustled in and directed her small army of servants to stoke the fire, clean up the dishes from last night, sweep and polish and generally make the room neat again, each one curtsying before her before rushing off to obey. Rida herself came and curtsied deeply.

“Please draw me a bath,” Sif said when the other woman rose. “And set out my court clothes.”

“As you wish.”

When she had been bathed and dressed, Sif considered her reflection for a long time. She wore subdued shades of maroon and dark silver, but the Dragon Crown with its jeweled eyes glittered against her black hair, and the muted gold of her gauntlets shimmered to match. She gave one of the buckles an adjustment and drew in a breath.

“I look the part, at least,” she murmured. In the mirror she saw Rida looking up at her.

“No matter what you wear, Lady Sif, you are always our Queen.”

Somehow she was able to thank Rida past the lump in her throat, and then it was time to go, to make her way down from her chambers to the public levels of the palace with a retinue that grew the lower they went. Thor fell into step beside her, but they did not exchange more than a brief greeting. There was something that Sif had to do before she could hold court, and it had cost her quite a lot of sleep the night before.

As most of their hangers-on filtered away into the throne room, Sif and Thor went to the center of the huge atrium. To one side was the entrance to the palace, the doors opening onto the parade grounds flung wide, and in the very center, Gungnir stood balanced on its end, right where Loki had left it when they had departed for Midgard. Had it only been a few days ago? It felt much longer to her.

“The spells will recognize you,” Frigga had told her gently last night at dinner when Sif had voiced her concerns that the spear, one of the foremost symbols of her right to rule, would reject her somehow. She had been mostly worried that it would harm the child, for Sif knew that she would have the loyalty of the Einherjar regardless of if she held Gungnir or her own glaive, but in court, symbols were important to some. “When you and Loki wed, the magic binding you to the realm settled into your blood. That same magic was part of Gungnir’s forging. It will know you by your touch.”

She felt a flutter inside her, and smoothed a hand over the spot on her belly. _Me too, little one_, she thought.

Gathering her skirts in her hands, Sif stepped up onto the platform the spear rested on. Her hands hovered a moment over the golden shaft before she gripped it tightly, pulling it toward her. For a moment it was chilly beneath her palms… but it warmed just as suddenly, and electric energy surged up her arms and pooled in her chest, and she felt… better. Lighter.

“Did it work?” Thor asked uncertainly from behind her. Sif turned, holding Gungnir before her with a smile.

“Of course it worked. I am Queen, am I not?” With a toss of her hair, she walked past him, Gungnir’s point preceding her into the throne room.

When she had waited for the fanfare and the announcement of her arrival, though, the feeling of being past her earlier misgivings had subsided somewhat. An entire room of faces had turned to watch her walk past, to curtsy and bow as she made her way down the center aisle and up the stairs.
to the huge golden throne. The few times Sif had sat in it as a ruler had not been in circumstances such as these, and she could feel the energy of the room was vastly different now.

Thor turned to stand on the level below the throne, and when she stood before it Sif turned to watch as those in the room bent their knees one more time as she sat. Giving a moment for the rustling to subside, Sif raised Gungnir and let the sound of it hitting the floor reverberate through the room until it was silent.

“As you all now know, our King has been taken from us, transported to a far distant place by an unknown power. He is alive, this I know. But until he returns, or we find a way to rescue him, the throne is mine. This is my right.” She let the butt of Gungnir’s staff hit the floor again, putting a quick end to the whispering that rippled outward from the throne.

“My Queen…”

This came from one of the courtiers on the lower level. Sif fixed him with her coolest stare, the one she used often on new Einherjar who had delusions of the extent of their skill. He seemed to shrink, but only slightly.

“You may address the throne, Lord Horik,” she said. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Thor giving her a bemused look, and resisted the urge to shoot one back. She was doing her best to be impressive, and if she’d borrowed some from her husband, Thor could simply stow the ribbing for later.

“My Queen, if Prince Thor is here, should the line of succession not fall to him?”

“The King is not dead, nor has he abdicated. There is no question of succession.” Sif adjusted her grip on Gungnir. “Further questions on this matter will not be received here. You may bring your concerns to me personally at another time, for I have petitioners to hear.”

Lord Horik stepped back with a bow, but Sif clocked him speaking with some others he had arrived with. He would be one to watch, she thought. Perhaps a candidate for what amounted to treason; she remembered that Horik had lately fallen into financial hardship, and perhaps selling some of his stockpiled Asgardian steel to Midgardian buyers would allow him to continue to live as he felt was his due.

Strictly speaking, she did not have to hear petitions in person. More often they were vetted and then brought before her or Loki, depending on their nature; given that Sif was responsible for the training and disposition of Asgard’s armies, and Loki tended to spend most of his time dealing with problems of grander scope than land disputes and taxation, the large part of decisions were reached at lower levels than the king and queen. But it was important that everyone respect her and see her as a ruler too, not just a warrior. She could hold all the titles in the world, she could have her blood in the scrolls and the magic of the realm in her veins, but in four years with her husband she had come to appreciate the value of a little show.

She went as long as she could, but when her stomach started becoming loud enough for Thor to hear, Sif rose. Everyone bowed as she and Thor left the throne room, though once the curtain fell behind the Royal Guardsmen she heard a noise as though everyone had started talking at once. Shaking her head, she let them walk in silence a bit until a noise made her look over.

Thor had his lips pressed tightly together and was so clearly trying not to chuckle that he was turning scarlet enough to match his cape. Sif had an idea what he was thinking about and scowled at him.

“Do not say it,” she said. “Do not, Thor, I—“
“You have learned much from Loki.” He started laughing.

“I learned he talks in his sleep. Have you not learned from Jane?”

“Sometimes more than I will ever admit. But speaking of learning...”

“Horik?”

“He was always a grand one. It does not surprise me he has put himself into a position where he might be suspected of doing something to keep his status.” Thor shook his head as they walked, offering his arm whenever they reached a set of stairs. “But I know him of old. He is loyal to the throne, for all his...”

“Personality flaws?”

“Yes. He would not betray Asgard, Sif.”

Though she turned her thoughts around in her mind, Sif could find no more fault in that statement than Thor. “Maybe not Asgard,” was all she could say, and that felt weak.

Later, after she had eaten and changed, she went to find Frigga. Always the old queen had been a source of stability in her life, someone to talk to when Sif could not sort through her own thoughts. Now she needed that more than ever.

When Sif ambled in, Frigga greeted her with a smile and a warm embrace. She sent most of her handmaidens away to spin elsewhere and talk to the courtiers, asked a few more to fetch food and drink (ignoring Sif’s protests that she had already eaten), and had tucked her arm through Sif’s and steered them out into the sunny water gardens before the dust had even settled.

“The only bodies I can mobilize that quickly are my soldiers.” Sif smiled as she talked, though. The gardens were soothing today.

“Give it a few more centuries, dear. You’ll have all the practice you need.” Frigga smiled a little conspiratorially. “Soldiers and handmaidens only differ in their training. Their functions are essentially the same – maintain order at all costs.”

“Soldiers also go armed.”

“Handmaidens are armed with ears to hear and eyes to see, and the quickest tongues in any realm. Information, as I think you know, is one of the deadliest weapons of all.” They paused as Frigga bent to inhale the scent of one of the star flowers sent from Alfheim last spring. “But I hope you did not come here only to talk about wars of the field and the feasting hall.”

“The matters are not entirely unrelated. I am sorry, my lady, to burden you with such things. I wish we could talk only about the child or the harvest, but...”

“Fate weaves as it will. This I know.” Frigga pressed her lips together, but Sif did not think it was in displeasure. “Something troubles you beyond the surface matters.”

“You are very perceptive, my lady.” They walked in silence as Sif tried to organize her thoughts and put them to words. “It is difficult to describe. It is a thought on the very tip of my tongue, and yet I cannot grasp it.”

“You are far too young to be forgetting so easily.”
“I have had other things on my mind. And I think… I think at the time, it was not relevant.” Sif furrowed her brow in thought. “It was something Loki said… no. It was something Loki was doing. But as I said, at the time it was nothing. It is only important now that he is gone and I, I am not clever enough. If our positions were reversed…”

She felt tears sting her eyes and shamefully started to brush them away until Frigga reached up and gently took her hands.

“You are safe here,” she said gently. “You are not a queen or a shieldmaiden but only Sif, my daughter. It is all right.”

“I have cried enough lately. Tears are a comfort, but they do not accomplish much. I have too much to do.”

*

Late that night, Sif paced the bedchamber, unable to sleep. She had another day ahead of her, but too much on her mind to settle down. She knew she had to, for her own sake, and yet...

Annoyed, she tried to settle herself with her weapons. Her knives were always well kept, though not pristine – a pristine weapon being one that had never been tested before, after all – but the sound of metal on whetstone grated on her nerves, and the longer it went on the more annoyed she got, until it reached a head, and with a yell she flung the knife in her hand at the wall. It stuck, quivering, above the table at Loki’s side of the bed.

Putting her head in her hands, Sif drew deep breaths until her heart slowed. “Tears and rage,” she muttered. “I disliked adolescence enough the first time.”

The benefit of the whole thing was that she had exhausted herself, and with a wave of her hand in the general direction of the light crystals, the room dimmed. Her eyes closed on the sight of candlelight glittering on the runes on Loki’s books, and the edge of the knife in the wall above them.

*

The helicarrier was on the move again, cruising out above the northern Atlantic on a leisurely course back to Washington, D.C. Fury could have been there already, but he needed the time to get things in a semblance of order here. SHIELD had been responsible for a major treaty breach with the planet’s first extraterrestrial allied world, and he was now heading up the biggest damage control operation in memory.

“Ambassador Lewis has informed me four times this morning alone that countries are threatening to declare SHIELD bases threats to their national security due to tensions now existing between Asgard and Earth,” Coulson said as he walked onto the command deck. “They know we’re responsible.”

“Do they know why?”

“Not yet, sir. But I think if the Ambassador gets any more upset, they will.”

“See if you can mollify her. I don’t have the time, Coulson.”

“SWORD is reporting more activity. It spiked minutes after the Harstad event.”

“Related?”

“ Seems likely. Agent Brand is, as usual, upset about it.”
“It’s finally time to give her more resources. Make sure some of our best scientists are on the next transport up.”

“That’ll make her happier.”

“Good to know.” Fury paused, then activated the privacy settings in his ready room. “And Asgard?”

“I don’t think there’s a lot that will make the Queen less angry short of bringing her husband back.”

Fury ran a hand over his face. His nose has been put back together, but he remembered the look in Sif’s eyes when she’d struck him. Of the two of them he’d always thought Loki the more volatile one, the one most likely to fly off the handle and get violent, and he’d always been thankful he’d never been on the receiving end of it. But now he realized Sif was just as dangerous.

“Ambassador Lewis hasn’t had further communication, if that’s what you want to know,” Coulson said after a moment. “For now, we’re holding to the Queen’s statement that Asgard will need to withdraw and consider its options.”

“Then I guess that’s where we are.” Fury leaned on his desk a minute, thinking. Coulson waited patiently, arms folded across his chest.

“Sir,” he said at last. “I think it might be a good idea to talk to them. They’re angry, but you need them.”

“I know.”

“B Team can’t handle everything by itself. Those people are… well, you know who’s on the team —”

“Ours are the best.” Fury sighed. “Get everyone together in one of the conference rooms. We’ve got work to do.”

* *

“So this is Asgard, huh?”

Sif glanced at the Guardsman controlling the gun boat and made a small motion of her head. The boat adjusted course slightly and soared in an arc around the main part of the city. Her home was beautiful up here, and she closed her eyes a moment, breathing in the scent of gardens and listening to the rush of the wind. It was easy to get mired in the details of ruling, but she could not lose sight of why she had agreed to Frigga’s plan in the first place; Sif loved Asgard and loved its people, and was willing to sacrifice much to protect it. That she had gained so much was something she was eternally grateful for.

In the boat with her were the two women from SHIELD, Agent May and Agent Danvers. May seemed as reserved as ever, though Sif could see a light in her eyes that had not been there in Norway. Danvers, though, grinned and put her face to the wind as they flew in their circuit of the city.

“This is my home,” Sif replied. “It has stood since the time of Bor, Odin’s father. Over five thousand years of history are contained in its stones.”

“That’s a lot to be responsible for.” Agent May looked out as they passed a floating tower, close enough to see their reflection in its metal walls.
“I would not have sworn my blade to service of the realm if I did not feel equal to the task. A vow is not something I enter into lightly.” She caught May’s eye and saw understanding there, and felt a little better. With SHIELD she did not know who she could trust, but when she took them as individuals, it was easier.

When they had landed and after Sif had sent off her attendants for food and drink, the three of them sat on couches in the airy small hall. Her hands tucked round the curve of her belly, Sif looked between the two of them.

“What news?”

“We’ve had SWORD analysts look at the stars visible through the portal at the Norway installation,” Carol said. “SWORD is our orbital division—”

“I read of it.” Sif gestured at the large photographs of the portal on the table between them. Just looking at it made her skin crawl and her heart ache, made her keenly aware that somewhere at the other end of the spells, Loki was not happy about something. “What did they find?”

May and Carol exchanged a look. “The stars visible through the portal aren’t recognizable from any known star map,” May said. “We have no idea where the portal opened to, and so we have no idea where exactly in space the King and Dr. Foster were deposited. We’re still working on a vector based on observed light phenomena at the time of the portal’s opening, but that’s not exact. And anyway, we have no way to get there anymore. The cube that was produced in Harstad has become unstable again, and we haven’t been able to stimulate it to those levels since.”

“Not that I think anyone wants to, really,” Carol added. “I watched that footage enough times trying to capture a clear image of those stars. It was freaky.”

“Yes,” Sif whispered. Then, more strongly to cover up the fact her hand shook slightly as she collected the photographs and stacked them (making sure the photo of the open portal was under the rest), she said, “Yes. Is there any way you can make even an estimation?”

“In addition to working on the mathematical trajectory – something that’ll only give us the general sector of space they were headed to – we’ve got our orbital telescopes scanning for matching star fields as fast as we can program them. But it’ll take time, Your Majesty.”

“I wish we could give you better news.”

“Well, at least we know where they are not. And I know that Loki still lives.” Sif rubbed her thumb over her belly thoughtfully. “If he has survived this long, chances are good they will both return home.”

“How can you be sure he’s…”

“I feel it. We are connected, he and I. And I must have a little faith in him.”

“Well,” Carol said with a smile. “Who better to find their way home from space than a sorcerer king and an astrophysicist?”

*  

“Fury—”

“No.”
“But Stark, we—“

“No, Romanoff. I am in no mood to be fed another pack of lies.”

“Goddamnit it, Stark,” and Tony looked up from his tablet, because Natasha never cracked her cool, but here she was standing in his lab with her arms crossed and her brows drawn together, glaring at him.

“Okay, let me explain to you why I don’t trust you,” he said, setting the tablet down. “One, you’re Fury’s little gofer, you do whatever he wants – I mean, you gotta wonder how SHIELD got the data for their little cube project from all the little nasties we’ve been taking out over the last four years – and B, it’s been four years and we don’t know a thing about you.”

“I didn’t know telling you my life story was a prerequisite for trust!”

“Well it wouldn’t fucking hurt!”

“Hey!”

Both of them turned to look at Bruce, hunched over his keyboard. Tony felt a stab of guilt; when he’d invited Banner to live here, he hadn’t really been joking when he’d promised a workspace that was as free of conflict as possible. He knew Bruce could take the bantering and Tony’s constant need for attention, but actual argument tended to start off stress responses, and that was what they wanted to avoid.

“You two don’t get along, that’s fine,” he said in a tight voice. “But Natasha doesn’t have an obligation to tell you what she wants to keep close, and focusing on that right now is only going to make all this worse.”

“She’s SHIELD, Banner—“

“She’s one of us.” Bruce took a deep breath, flexed his fingers. “She’s an Avenger, just like us. I didn’t join up because I wanted to work for SHIELD, I joined up because I got friends, family, people who don’t care about the fact I’ve got the other guy inside me, who aren’t afraid of me. We all carry our own monsters inside us, Tony. I can’t blame Natasha for not wanting to let hers out just yet. If she wants to be one of us without talking about it, that’s fine by me.”

Both Tony and Natasha were quiet for a minute, just staring at him. Finally, Natasha’s brow relaxed a little. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said softly. “Thank you for that.”

“No problem. I think fighting amongst ourselves is pointless right now, anyway. We’ve got work to do. Let me just…” He spun his screen around.

“Someone’s been supplying SHIELD’s enemies with Asgardian steel, right? Without using the Bifrost to move around, as far as anyone knows. Heimdall says he’d see it if they asked him for passage, unless it was under a spell that supposedly only a few people have the skill to cast, but they have to get to Earth somehow, so I used one of the algorithms we had laying around already and modified it to track those weird particles that’re generated every time Loki does something with his magic.”

“You got Smiley to show off his magic in front of a detector?” Tony and Natasha walked over to get a closer look at the map; for a moment Bruce had to breathe and close his eyes, but he swallowed some water and nodded.

“Amazing what people will do when you ask nicely and don’t pester them for years, Tony.”
“So you sucked up to him.”

“I just asked. Politely.”

“And he just agreed? Politely?”

“Can we focus?” Natasha was studying the map closely. “So all these dots are places where that same energy’s been detected?”

“It’s faint in lots of places – the particles have dispersed, so I’m guessing those are older signals. But it’s definitely still traceable, and lots of places have stronger signals.”

“More recent contacts.”

“Right. I’ve ranked them… uh, here—“ he pulled up a graph and a chart to one side of the screen “—based on strength of signal and assumed time of contact. And then I’ve isolated patterns. They appear in clusters, see? Latveria, Russia, China. This person is selling Asgardian steel and who knows what else to these cells in these various countries. They make five or six at a time and then move on to the next.”

“We don’t know of any enemy cells from anyone operating in some of these locations,” Natasha pointed at a few of them. “No intel on these anywhere, are you sure of the tracking—“ she paused, looked at Bruce. “Never mind.”

“Just because SHIELD doesn’t know doesn’t mean there’s nothing there. But look.” He tapped the screen above the Ukraine, zoomed in on an area of the country. “They’ve made three visits to this area in the last week. If they follow the pattern in previous cities, they should return a few more times.”

The three of them shared a look. “Pack your parkas, campers,” Tony said, heading for the door. “We’re going on a field trip.”

*

The suns were low in the sky, turning the rim of the sea into a brilliant golden line. Sif, on the balcony of the royal chambers, watched the gold intensify and the colors of the Branches above Asgard shift and grow brighter as night came closer. She was hungry, but the Bifrost had just brought a group of warriors home, and there was a scarlet speck flying toward the palace that meant not only dinner, but news.

“The rebellions grow bolder now that news of Loki’s disappearance has spread,” Thor said as soon as he landed. “But I found out something that might be of interest.”

Over dinner, Thor told her more. The rebellion they had gone to put down was centered around a mining community – one that, incidentally did a lot of trade in Roda’s Forest – where some of the workers had incited first a strike for better pay, and then a full-on rebellion. It had not just been miners, though; someone had gotten together enough money to hire mercenaries, and when Thor had had one of the leaders brought before him after the fighting had been stopped, they said they’d gotten the money by selling some of the mine’s iron ore.

“That mine produces some of the best quality iron in the Realms,” Sif murmured. At Thor’s look, she shrugged. “A good weapon is not forged from scraps, Thor. Did they say who they sold it to?”

“No, but they said he sounded Asgardian, and he had some strange charms on his cloak that he used to make the ore just vanish.”
“Bespelled charms?” Sif set her fork down. Loki enchanted items, certainly; after her shield had been ruined on Midgard years ago, he had presented her with a new one bound with spells of various kinds. But she doubted he would have provided someone else with any such items, as it was not an easy process to bind magic to an object and thus he reserved it for very special favors.

“It seems that way. Which means our task is going to be much more difficult.”

“We will have to keep an eye on the smelters in the city. Undoubtedly someone with a supply of high-quality iron will want to turn it into Asgardian steel.”

“To then sell to the criminals of Midgard and the Nine Realms.”

“Hopefully your friends on Midgard are having some luck of their own.”

Something must have shown in her expression because Thor sat back in his chair, watching her. “You are still angry.”

“Are you not?”

Thor looked down at his goblet, turning the stem in his fingers. “I do not like thinking ill of my friends, for not every Midgardian is responsible for this,” he said slowly. “And yet...”

Sif watched the struggle play out on her friend's face for a long moment before she reached out and took his hand. “For what it is worth, Thor, I do not think your friends would betray you. Captain Rogers, in particular, has as much guile as a rock.”

“He would surprise you, I think.” But Thor was smiling again, just slightly, and through her own sadness Sif's heart lifted to see some of his pain lifted a bit. His eyes had been too sad since Jane had vanished into that black space. For that matter, hers probably had been as well.

Still, when the conversation turned to less serious matters, Sif was grateful. There was still something nagging her, and she was beginning to get the impression that if she did not figure it out, matters would become much more difficult.

*  

“Captain Edwik has come as requested, my Queen.”

Sif looked up from the scroll she'd been staring at. “Thank you, Egil. Show him in and then leave us.”

Edwik bowed when he was led in. “My lady. Are you well?”

“I am doing as well as I can. Do you have anything to report?”

“I have thoroughly investigated the connections and business transactions of all those lords and ladies you asked me to, my Queen, but there is nothing amiss. Nothing beyond the usual, anyway.”

“Nothing at all?”

“I am sorry, Lady Sif. I would have told you immediately if I found anything that was not a normal act of skulduggery.”

“Very well.” Sif prodded the scrolls on the desk, scowling at them. Loki could sit here for days while he puzzled something out or manipulated two sides to find the middle, but a few hours and she was full of restless energy. “Thank you for looking into this matter, Edwik. I know that you have become
much busier since I returned.”

“It is my duty to serve the throne, my lady. I have done it since before Prince Thor and the King were born, and I will do it until I breathe my last.” He smiled kindly, a strange sight in his gruff face. “And I like you. I would follow you until Ragnarok.”

“May that day not come for a long time.”

“Is there anything else you need of me, Lady Sif?”

“Not at this moment. But please continue to keep watch on those noble families, and let me know if something seems amiss, and please continue to oversee the preparation of the Einherjar. I feel war coming, and we must be prepared.”

“War, my lady? With Midgard?”

“I cannot say.” Sif shook her head. “But that will come if it comes. Let us be prepared.”

“As you wish, my Queen.”

*

“What do you mean they're gone?”

“I mean that I called the tower, the dedicated line that we talked Mr. Stark into installing, and the response from JARVIS was that the Avengers are not in the building or even in the country.”

Fury clenched his fists. “Did JARVIS happen to mention where they are?”

“Kiev, Sir.”

“Why?”

*

“Why.”

Natasha looked back over her shoulder at Tony, almost comically engulfed in a puffy winter coat. “It's not that cold, Stark.”

“It's fucking freezing, Natasha.”

In their earpieces, JARVIS informed them that the temperature was Fifty-four degrees Fahrenheit, Sir, and Tony scowled.

“It feels fucking freezing.”

From the back of the group, Clint stage-whispered, “That's because you're a weenie, Tony.”

“Listen, carnie--”

Rubbing a hand over his face, Steve snapped. “Shut up, Stark.”

Perhaps alarmed by this display, Tony subsided, and Natasha put aside her concern and exhaustion for a moment to hide a smile. They were all tired and worried, and if their banter carried more edges to it than usual, she knew it for a coping mechanism. The only one not visibly stressed was,
surprisingly, Bruce. Natasha fell into step beside him as they headed for the terminal.

“You seem pretty relaxed, Doctor,” she said. Bruce shrugged, switching his duffel back to his other hand.

“Well, when holes in the universe are opened up by man-made zero-point energy devices that shouldn’t even be able to exist, you just kind of learn to roll with it.”

“That seems like a healthy attitude.”

“Either that or it’s all being saved up for one big event.” He smiled at her in a slightly unsettling way, and Natasha felt a stab of alarm until she realized he was joking with her.

“Well, you might need to be a little less balanced,” she said. “We’re not heading into nice places. I know how things operate around here, and lately... well, you’ve seen the news. So watch your step, this place can get a little rough.”

“Did you just--” Tony pushed between them, grabbing at Bruce's sleeve. “Did Romanoff just quote Star Wars?”

“I'm a spy, I don't live under a rock. Besides, you watch it on a weekly basis.”

“Damn right I do.” Tony put his hands in his pockets. “So, I figure we can go check into the 11 Mirrors, de-stress, get some varenyky—”

“Figure again.” Natasha smiled. “We’re not here on vacation, Stark. And if we want to be believable and not scare our potential contacts deeper underground, we’re going to do this my way.”

“You way? What’s your way?”

She held his gaze until he became visibly uncomfortable. “Well, the varenyky sounds good.” Natasha strode on ahead listening to Bruce try to contain his chuckles as Tony fell back again.

Always so much fun when I find that combination of words to make him shut up, she thought.

*  

Eysteinn was about to close up shop for the day when he heard the door open. For a few moments he was tempted to say he was closed, but he needed the custom. Asgard was supposedly going to outfit thousands of new Einherjar in preparation for some conflict, probably the rebellions springing up all over the place, but so far none of that had trickled down to his shop.

Of course, he was on the farthest moon of Vanaheim and way out away from any of the big trading centers. He wasn't exactly anyone's first choice when it came to mass production.

“Hello?” he called, when no voice rang out asking for assistance. Leaning around the doorway separating the front part of the store from the smelting going on in the back, he saw only one man with his hood drawn up. They didn't usually come like that way out here in Hylvard, but could be he was a traveler. “Can I help you, m'lord?”

“I am no lord.” The man's voice was gravelly, but Eysteinn could hear an Asgardian accent. Could this be a messenger from the palace with a commission?

“My apologies,” he said hastily. “How can I be of service?”

“I need steel.”
“Well, I have no good ore—“

“I will provide you with high-quality iron ore. Tomorrow there will be a cart of it behind your shop; I will expect to receive my first results in two days.”

“With all due respect, sir, that is impossible—“

“Make it possible. There is much in store for you – more custom, in particular – if you meet my requirements.”

“I'll have to charge you double the going rate for quick work of quality.”

“Done.” The cloak opened and a gloved hand tossed a leather sack on the counter, spilling gold coins out. Shaking, Eysteinn picked one of them off the worn, shiny wood; it was Asgardian mint, new, with the King's profile on one side and the Queen's on the reverse. There was enough there to fund him for the year, to get his debtors off his back...

“It will be done, sir. But if I may ask... how will I know who to give our product to?”

“I am certain that you will not be able to mistake them.” There was a wry humor in the man's voice. “You had best prepare your workers and your shop, Eysteinn. And tell your wife and daughters you will be working quite a lot more than usual for some time; if this order is completed to my satisfaction, you will be hearing from me a lot more often.”

Eysteinn's mouth was dry, but he nodded. “That would be well, sir. Thank you for the business.” But by the time he was done talking, the shop was empty, and he was left with only the pile of gold and the feeling that he'd just gotten himself into a Realm of trouble.
I thought this chapter would never be finished but HERE WE ARE. OKAY. I have excuses and really this is all going down on my own time anyway, so I'll just skip all my talking and get right to the chapter which somehow ended up full of *Star Wars* references. I hope you enjoy!

*geodesic*; a curve whose tangent vectors remain parallel if they are transported along it... geodesics are the shortest path between points in space.

“So.”

The meeting room had cleared out, but Peter Quill and Gamora had remained behind after they'd all decided what to do. She'd sat quietly, watching him pace. But apparently it had been long enough.

“I don't think they're in cahoots with your dear old dad, if that's what you're wondering,” he said to her reflection. Gamora raised an eyebrow, then went back to picking an probably imaginary speck of grime off one of her blades.

“I think the creepy pale one was terrified of Thanos, which actually backs up his claim of being smarter than the average flerken. Anyone who wasn't raised by Thanos ought to be terrified of him.”

“And you just feel, what, complicated toward him? Is that it?”

Gamora didn't say anything, but she scrubbed slightly harder at the spot. That was all the response he needed.

“I think we should keep them around a while. If they're interesting to Thanos... if this business with the Infinity Stones isn't a crock...”

“It's not.” Gamora looked up from her weapon for a moment, then turned her eyes back to it. “They're our best bet on stopping trouble before it starts.”

“You know, I'm surprised you're going along with this.”

“Why? Because I tried to kill you when we met?” Gamora shrugged and slid her blade back into its sheath. “I happen to like the galaxy how it is. And whatever Thanos wants with the Stones, I know it won't be anything good.”

“Tears before bedtime?”

“You *do* catch on.”

“Smarter than the average flerken myself.” Quill sighed. “Go get our new best friends. Time to be treasure hunters.”

*
Jane had managed to fall asleep after they'd talked for a while, but despite his exhaustion Loki could not find rest. The bed was hard and narrow, the noise of distant machinery drifted up through the vents, the air was suffused with the faint scent of grease and sweat... and whenever he closed his eyes, he could see Thanos grinning down at him, reaching into his mind with only a few words and pulling out the things he thought he had successfully brought in line.

His thoughts kept drifting to Sif as well, and every time they did he wondered what madness had possessed him not to confide in her that the oaths he had made still stood - both of them. The one with Jotunheim he knew how to worm around if he had to, but the other one ought to have died above that moon four years ago. He should have told Sif once he'd recovered enough to be certain, but there had been so much going on, and then he had been afraid that it would once again shatter what they had built up, and now he would pay the price for it.

Surtur lives, he thought, And now I know where he has been.

The idea of a mad fire demon arriving on Asgard with the backing of an army from the outer reaches of the universe and threatening his wife made his blood truly turn to ice... and the thought of Thanos reaching the vault and taking what it contained was even more terrifying. But there was nothing for it. Loki knew he would have to clean up this mess if he hoped to maintain things the way he liked them.

He rose, heading for the door. Mantis had told them not to leave the room, that they would be collected - as though they were children! - when they were needed again, but he needed to think, to know what tools he had at his disposal. But as soon as he approached, the door slid open to reveal Peter Quill standing outside.

“Going somewhere?”

“I grow tired of waiting,” Loki snapped. “If you and yours will not aid us, then I will find someone else willing to do so.”

Quill affected dismay. “I am so sorry, Your Worship, but unlike everyone else, I don't ask how high as I jump for you. We have this system going where I ask for input and we talk about it like, you know, a bunch of adults. And a raccoon, but he's an adult raccoon—“

“I am not interested in being mocked.”

“Then you came to the wrong part of space. Look, we want to help.”

“I—what?”

“We want to help you guys out. Whatever Thanos wants with the Infinity Stones we can't let him collect them, so we're going to nab them first, and if our search gets you guys home, well, great. And the best part is that we've already got a lead.” While Loki stared at him, Quill clapped him on the shoulder with a broad grin.

“Wake up the lady, Your Highnessness,” he said brightly. “We're going on a little trip.”

* 

“So wait—we're going where?”

Mantis had returned and provided them with clothes, saying that what they had would make them stand out far too much. Jane now sported a strange gun on her hip, holstered on a belt slung low across her hips. Loki, though, wondered whose idea his new clothes were, and just how much they
disliked him.

“The more you play with it, the more frustrated you're going to get,” Jane hissed as they followed Mantis through Knowhere's corridors.

“How can I not?” Loki twitched the cloak he'd been given forward a little. The leather trousers were tight enough to be immodest regardless, and no matter how often Sif told him (usually from her comfortably warmed spot among the furs) that she admired his physique from behind, he had carefully designed his leathers with the couturiers to suit his needs, and these clothes did not fill them. “Does anyone here wear clothing that fits properly?”

“Quit complaining, they're helping us. You can at least pretend to act grateful.”

“Pretend to act?” But Jane had a point – the alternative, after all, was extremely distasteful, and doing this gave him time to work out how to take care of the fiery loose end in this part of the universe as well.

“You know what I mean. Besides, you keep insisting you're practically a god, I'm sure you could wear a cardboard box and look good.”

Rocket and Groot were loading crates onto the ship when Mantis left them at the docking port. “Good of you to join us, Emperor Tightpants,” Rocket said. “Jane, you look hot.”

“I don't think I want to hear that from a raccoon.” Jane crossed her arms. “Peter Quill said we had a lead?”

“That's right. But I don't like it. We don't like it, right Groot?”

“I am Groot.”

“Yeah, it's gonna be trouble. Hope you guys can keep up, because we're going to be goin' in hot.”

“You're scaring the customers, Rocket.” Peter stuck his head out, leaning forward with a hand on the upper jamb. “Get in and get seated. We're leaving as soon as we're done here.”

When they'd disengaged from the docking clamp and started on a long, arcing course away from Knowhere, Gamora turned in her seat. “We're going to a place called The Hub,” she told them. “Downtown on The Hub is a haven for smugglers and criminals. We'll fit right in, as long as you two let us do the talking.”

“Our contact there is one Karcath,” Peter said as he sat heavily in the pilot's seat. “He deals in the rare and expensive for the people in Uptown.”

“This is gonna be a huge mistake,” Rocket said. Gamora rolled her eyes and rested her hand on a lever.

“Prepare for hyperjump in three... two... one... initializing.”

* 

“My lord Thanos, we have received news from our mutual friend.”

He turned from the edge; the expanse of the universe had always held fascination for him, and he found it soothing to contemplate it. Trillions of tiny, frantic little lives, running hither and yon as though what they did had a lasting effect, as if they would be remembered beyond their pitiful
lifespans. All that would change soon, of course.

“What is it?”

“The Asgardian queen rules. She searches for weak links in Asgard's armor, but our friend is confident. She is distracted by the chaos in the realms she rules over, by her own condition, by her search for her husband. And her friend, Thor... he is much the same. He will not be a problem.”

“Are we certain we are not underestimating them?”

“My lord?”

“These Asgardians, those humans who stand with them... I have been studying their histories. They have proven to be remarkably resourceful and intelligent for beings of their stature. I want no chances taken, do you understand me?”

“Fear not, my lord,” the Other said, slightly alarmed. “Our plan is on schedule. Soon you will hold omnipotence in your very hand, and you will be able to fulfill all your wishes.”

“I know. See to your army, to our guest, and give our mutual friend the further instructions we agreed upon. The Asgardian queen's husband is mine to deal with, though, remember. He travels to The Hub with my estranged daughter; see that he does not leave it alive.”

“It will be done.” The Other bowed and left down the stairs in a rustle of fabric, and Thanos turned back to the stars.

Trillions of lives, and soon they would all be at his mercy.

* 

They dropped out of hyperjump at the inner edge of a ring of asteroids. In the distance was a yellow-red star; it was old, dying from the slow decay of its own chemical reactions, but it still could illuminate the huge space station rotating slowly around its axis, not far ahead of them.

“Try to wipe the drool off your chin, Jane,” Loki hissed as Peter engaged their engines and they moved toward the station. Jane just grinned at him.

“We're in space,” she replied. “We are in space and we are going to a space station, and we just went through a stable, sustainable wormhole generated by technology and it's all possible, everything I read as a kid, everything I thought about all through my doctorate...”

“Need I remind you that Asgard has been doing this for millennia?”

“Does that mean I should be less excited about it?”

“Quiet, kids, I need to make a phone call.” Peter put a headset on and depressed one of the buttons on the ship's console. “Hub control, this is light freighter Danabb, requesting landing and approach vector.”

“What it means is that you are forgetting what we are here for--”

“Yes, Loki, I just forgot that my husband and my daughter are millions of light-years away and that my chances of ever seeing them again in my lifetime are extremely slim but oh, we're on a ship that could change that--”

“Danabb, what is your cargo and purpose of visit?”
“No cargo. Was hoping we could pick some up while we were here, Control.” Peter shot Loki and Jane a dirty look over his shoulder and added, “And get some shore leave, we're all going a little crazy.”

“Copy that. You are cleared to land, Danabb. Transmitting approach vector and coordinates of landing platform now. Hope you can cover your fees.”

“Maybe we can sell the royal asshole to cover them,” Rocket muttered.

Loki, pretending not to hear this, raised his eyebrows at Peter. “You are the least artful liar I have ever met. Do you actually have anything between your ears?”

Rocket twisted in his restraints and pointed one of his guns at Loki. “Shut up.”

“Good luck making that happen,” Jane told him. “He's bad at listening when he's told to stop talking. Unless it's his wife telling him to—”

“All of you shut up,” Gamora snapped. “I'm getting sick of this.” Peter grabbed the yoke and twisted it harder than was necessary to match the transmitted approach vector, throwing all of them against their restraints.

Through gritted teeth, Loki hissed, “In case we die because Peter Quill is an incompetent pilot I want you to know, Jane Foster, that I am an excellent listener.”

“You're better at lying.”

“Well, yes—” Loki clenched his jaw as they dropped precipitously to match a flight lane heading in to The Hub. “—but how do you suppose I became so good at that?”

“He has a point,” Gamora murmured as they cut power and drifted gently into the depressurized landing bay, lowered their skids, and settled. A bluish glow appeared around the edge of the bay entrance, and after a moment, a chime sounded to let them know the bay was pressurized again. Jane and Loki followed the others out of the ship.

“One tip for survival,” Rocket said, deliberately bumping into Loki’s side with his huge gun. “Don't talk.”

“Or look at anyone, to be honest with'ya.” Peter shrugged on a long leather jacket. “Even the Nova Corps doesn't make trips here very often. They know better.”

“Best to just watch your step,” Gamora finished. “This place can get a little rough.”

Loki and Jane exchanged a look as they pulled up their hoods. Drax fell in behind them, and they made their way out into the main part of Downtown.

If Knowhere had been intimidatingly crowded, Downtown was veritable overload. Smells, sights, sounds became a blur of activity and novelty, and over it all there was the distinct sense of danger.

“What a charming place,” Loki muttered. “Are we to perhaps meet our contact in a tavern? That is the convention, I believe?”

Jane ran a hand over her face. “I always knew it was a mistake for Tony to make you watch Star Wars.”

“Says the lady who can recite all six movies verbatim.”
“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It casts aspersions upon your ability to pass judgment when—“

From the front of the group, Peter Quill turned around and glared at Loki. “Shut up, Your Highnessness.”

“Why are you targeting me?”

“Because you're annoying. And because we're almost there.” He spun back around. “It really is better if you don't talk at all, either of you. You are pompous and you, Doctor Stardust, will attract enough attention. Humans aren't exactly popular out here, and I push it just on my own.”

Jane closed her mouth, but her lips twitched slightly. “Doctor Stardust,” she murmured. “I like that.”

They had come up to a part of the station that seemed a mix of residential and warehouses. Beings sat outside the latter in metal chairs or stood around with their hands on their weapons, watching as the small group walked by. They saw Gamora's confident hand on her blade and Drax's size and backed off, but their eyes did not stray until the group had moved on.

“Here we are,” Peter said quietly. One of the doors off to one side slid open with a rusty screech as he approached it, and wheezed shut after they were all inside. As they were blinking to adjust their eyes to the low light, an alien the approximate size and shape of a barrel of ale waddled out of a back room, peering at them suspiciously.

“Who're you?” the alien croaked.

“Prospective buyers.”

“I have nothing to sell to a human. Nothing you'd all be able to appreciate, anyway.”

“Don't know about that. I think we can appreciate information pretty easily.” Quill leaned on the counter. “And we heard you knew something about the Infinity Stones.”

Loki, watching from behind the rest of the group, saw the alien stiffen, the spines on its back twitching upward just slightly. Wise response, he thought.

“Keep your voices down,” the alien said at last. “Karcath won't be made a fool of or dragged out from his own shop because some noisy human and his entourage don't know not to talk about those things. Come to the back with me and let's deal.”

“We'll deal right here. This information's worth a lot to me, after all, and I'd rather not get shot for my trouble. Besides, I need my crew's approval.”

“Is it worth twenty thousand credits to you?”

Peter laughed. “Try twelve.”

“Do you even understand what you're getting into, asking about these things? I'm riskin' my own neck just dealing with you about them, and I won't take less than eighteen for that.”

“And I don't really care. You've survived worse out here. Fifteen, and we'll give you eight thousand now and seven when we hear what you've got to say and decide if it's worth our time or not.”

“Fine.” The alien – Karcath, apparently – watched as Peter handed over a credit chip with the appropriate amount on it, then tilted his head. “Into the back. I'm serious, I ain't getting caught talking
about contraband.”

“Contraband?” Jane muttered beside him.

“If it's being searched for by our mutual friend,” Loki mused, voice mostly covered by the sound of their footsteps on the concrete of the hallway floor, “It could be the local authorities using the guise of contraband to monitor interest in the Stones.”

“There ain't any local authorities around here,” Rocket hissed, but he gave Loki a very thoughtful look.

Karcath led them to a room that was obviously his on-site warehouse; it was full of weird containers full of murky liquid, jars that held specimens of various alien species, crates carefully labeled in fading paint using a half a dozen different languages. There was a long table that was presumably used for display or examination of items, surrounded by hopefully empty crates intended as chairs. Everyone pulled up a crate and sat, and Karcath leaned on the table as he looked at them.

“Only know of one Stone right now,” he said after a pause. “Once they were all known – Mirror and Aether, Orb and Lens and Prism, and the king of them, the Tesseract – but the Tesseract was lost, the Aether was hidden, and the rest have become such treasures that the people lucky enough to get hold of 'em couldn't keep 'em.”

“There are more?” Jane said before anyone could stop her. Karcath's eyes narrowed, but Jane had never let the vague threatening body language of an alien stop her before. “Are they all like the Tesseract?”

“The stones are supposed to have different properties. I don't know much more about it – I'm just a middleman, a trader. I wouldn't know where to begin to fence an Infinity Stone if it dropped itself into my lap and said hello.”

“So if they were all lost, how's one turned up now?”

Karcath grinned – at least, Loki assumed it was a grin – and pointed at Peter. “What a good question. You're not that dumb after all. While ago, word got out that someone was looking for the things.”

“Who?”

“No idea. This happens sometimes, some rich wacko gets it into their head that they're going to bring all the Stones together again—”

“Why?” Jane's brow was furrowed. “What's supposed to happen when you bring them together?”

“They give you control over everything. Wouldn't be a half bad tool for a smuggler.”

Luckily, Karcath didn't catch Loki rolling his eyes. Anyone with the power of all the Infinity Stones behind them would be all but unstoppable; no wonder everyone wanted to get their hands on them. “So you had a buyer.”

“Maybe. I don't like dealin' without meetin', you know? At least a rep could come, but all I had were messages funneled through a dozen different accounts before dead-ending. And I had a grinder backtrack it, a good grinder, so don't try to get me on that.”

“He means hacker,” Peter stage-whispered to them.

“Anyway, I put out my own feelers, and after a few weeks come to find out that one of the Stones
had been sitting up in the floating graveyard on that cloud planet for a while – you know the one?"

“Little bit familiar with it and its contents.”

“Are you a grave robber, Peter Quill?” Loki asked with interest.

“Who’s this guy, anyway?” Karcath asked, eyeing Loki. “He don’t act like any of you that I’ve ever met.”

“New guy. He's interning.” Peter shrugged. “Little bit hopeless. Anyway, so was the Stone there?”

“That's just it. We don't know.”

“What do you mean, you don't know?”

“I mean we never got close enough to the tomb it was supposed to be in. We were attacked by the security systems of another tomb and had to turn back, or risk venting our atmosphere. Not a nice way to go, y'know.”

“You didn't try circling back another way for it?”

“Wouldn't have worked, no other approach vectors that guaranteed us safety. I'm an opportunist, as I'm sure you fine folk can appreciate. If there's too much work...”

“...it's not profitable.”

“I can give you the coordinates of the tomb that the Orb is supposed to be in. For an extra fee, of course, to be negotiated.”

Jane ignored the silent protests of everyone around her and shoved forward again. “You said each one of these Stones has a different property,” she said, brow furrowed in thought. “The Tesseract is what we call a zero-point energy generator – basically, it produces energy without any loss due to the normal laws of physics. And it can open doorways to other parts of the universe, and it seems to be at least minimally aware of its surroundings.”

Loki kept his expression neutral, but thought to himself, It's far more than minimally aware of anything. It knows. And if it knows, then the others may as well.

“...the other Stones' properties?”

Karcath shrugged. “Other than the Tesseract, information costs more than I care to pay. The Orb, though, is supposed to be... life changin'.”

“That's helpful.”

“Hey, you're payin' me for it. Each Stone does somethin' different, gives whoever has it control over somethin' so fundamental to the universe that to have that Stone is to be a god, or whatever celestial being you happen to believe in.”

“We're not paying for the religion class,” Peter cut in. “Coordinates, Karcath?”

“I'm trying to tell'ya to be careful, Quill. These things aren't meant for humans like you.”

“I'm not just any human. I'm Star-lord.”

“...yeah, that means nothin' to me.” Karcath held out one of his limbs; it contained a clear
coordinate chip. He raised up a second limb beside it, making the universal sign for payment. “Trade you.”

They left the shop not long after, the coordinate chip tucked carefully in one of Gamora's pockets. Loki had raised an eyebrow at Peter when he'd nonchalantly handed it to her, and Peter had shrugged and said, “Of all of us, she's the one most likely to get back to the ship and do some good with that.”

“Hopefully we didn't pay out for nothin’,” Rocket muttered as they started back the way they'd come. “Fifteen thou ain't pocket change to us, not even with Starrrrrrr-lord there.”

Loki pulled his hood up, watching Peter Quill from the depths of it. The man hadn't turned around and shot something back at Rocket for his jibe, but his shoulders had stiffened under his leather coat. Something had put him on edge. Humming thoughtfully to himself, Loki pulled his hood up a little more and followed the group.

*

Karcath waited until the group had turned onto the main avenue leading back to Downtown before he darkened the windows and thumbed the activation switch hidden in a gouge in the countertop at the front of his shop. It switched on the strange bio-electric comm system that Thanos' representative, a tall cloaked man, had left him the last time he had visited Karcath. The trader had followed the instructions left with the device, and was following instructions now.

As soon as he entered his password, a holographic image of Thanos appeared before him. Karcath bowed his head.

“I have news, my lord Thanos.”

“Go on.”

“They just left, my lord. The human, Peter Quill, and the assassin Gamora, and the brute, tree, and vermin. And they had two others with them... a human woman who asked many questions, and a tall, dark man who said little but had watchful eyes.”

“The scientist and the Asgardian. Yes.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Did you give them the coordinates?”

“Yeah, and I warned 'em, like you said to do. But I don't think it'll stop them.”

“It was not meant to. Call up your cell; make it look sincere, but do not kill any of them. Make that point abundantly clear, won't you?”

“I understand, m'lord.”

“Then see to it.”

The hologram faded, and Karcath wiped sweat from his gland folds. He'd be glad when his role in all this was over and his position was secure.

Switching the secret comm system off and activating his normal one, he began calling up the members of the cell. It wasn't that long a walk from here to the landing pads, and he didn't want to
think about the consequences of not following orders.

* 

As they were walking back, Jane pushed her way up through the group. She'd gotten tired of staring at the crimson patterns on Drax's back, seeing the sway of Gamora's hair. She had never been good at following, really; now, with her heart aching (and her stomach, and that worried her too) and her mind racing, she moved forward until she was walking next to Peter.

“You should probably stay at the back with His Grand Arrogance.”

“Loki's not bad when you get used to him. I've been thinking...”

“Uh-oh.”

“I want to know more about what we're going to do with the Stones. I know why we should keep them away from Thanos, I've met him. He's...”

“Memorable.”

“Yeah.” Jane bit her lip. “Maybe they were separated for a reason, though. What if we're doing the wrong thing?”

“You're not like any scientist I knew when I was on Earth.”

“If my mental math is right, you left Earth when you weren't even a teenager. How many scientists did you know?”

“None of the good ones, looks like.” Peter hooked his thumbs in his belt loops as they walked. Behind them, Loki had grown bored and was needling Rocket, who seemed to be held back from murder only by his desire not to be found to be on Downtown again. “Look, you know how moving around works in space, right? For every action there's equal and opposite and all that?”

“I know...”

“You have to make your decisions out here the same way. The reaction for doing nothing about the Stones wouldn't be worth the warm, fuzzy feeling I'd get from ignoring responsibility. But I bet you've had to think like that at some point, Doctor Stardust.”

Jane was still mulling that thought over when the shots struck the ground just ahead of the group. Peter threw an arm in front of her and pulled out a strange-looking gun from its holster on his thigh. “They're on the rooftops!” he shouted, just as more people started pouring out from between the buildings. “Uh—“

“On it!” Rocket shouted, climbing up Groot's back and settling on his shoulders. He unslung a huge gun and opened fire, pointed teeth flashing white in the bursts of light from the muzzle. Concrete and metal exploded onto the street as the blasts struck the rooftop hiding spots of their attackers.

Peter was shooting at a group running at them, but it was Jane who saw the people coming at them from an alleyway to the side and unholstered her own gun. Not that different from a gun on Earth, she told herself. Remember what Natasha taught you...

Three quick shots later, there were three beings on the ground either dead or seriously wounded. “Nice shooting!” Peter shouted, then yelled in surprise as two streaks of green light passed them and spread out, tripping up the first wave coming at them. The light was followed up by the whistling
of Loki's tiny knives. Four more people dropped, and Peter and Jane both looked back at Loki. He shrugged.

“Someone had to do something effective.”

“You're such an asshole,” Peter muttered, but turned and fired again. “We're going to need to get through them or go around them to get back to the ship. Gamora—”

She was already moving past them, her blade out, and even Loki looked impressed as he caught up to Peter and Jane and watched. Gamora was fluid, deadly grace, every movement economical and deadly. Between her fists, feet, and weapon, she carved a path before them, and their attackers scattered before her.

“We should introduce her to Sif,” Jane said as they ran down the street. Loki gave her a horrified look.

They turned a corner and nearly ran right into the path of a line of hovering vehicles. There was a moment of confusion, at least until all the occupants all whipped out guns and started shooting at them. Jane cried out as a blast grazed her arm, tearing her sleeve. She slapped her hand over it, blood welling between her fingers.

“Side street!” Rocket yelled. “Left! Groot n' Drax and I got the rear!”

“Sure y'do!” one of their attackers shouted back. “We toldya not to come back 'ere, Rocket!”

Rocket retorted with something, but they were already running away, and Jane was too preoccupied with her arm to hear it. The pain was ebbing but it felt stiff and her fingers wouldn't fully flex, and she switched her gun to her other hand. She wasn't as good with this one, but she refused to be dead weight here, not when her return to her family could well depend on something she knew.

“Speeder overhead!” Gamora shouted, followed a moment later by a high-pitched whine as a dark, oval shape shot past the gap between buildings up above them.

“Let them make another pass,” Jane heard Loki mutter, and as they broke into another street – this one with more people on it – she saw him raise hands full of glowing power, and release it above them. The speeder flew right into the expanding, glowing cloud, and exploded. As shrapnel and pink, burning bits of flesh rained down around them, Loki made a sharp gesture with his hand, and it was as though an invisible shield had been raised between them and the destruction above.

There wasn't time for wit now; they heard the shooting from where they'd left Rocket, Groot, and Drax coming closer, and Gamora pulled Jane to her feet and they ran through mazelike streets until there were enough beings around to get lost in the crowd.

“What about Rocket and the others?” Jane asked as they pulled their hoods back up and walked through the landing bay doors toward where they had left their ship.

“They know where we are,” Gamora replied. Her eyes flicked back briefly to check their trail. “We'll lock the door, warm up the engines, and set up on the landing ramp of the ship with our weapons... and the magician, I suppose... and then we'll wait.”

They didn't have to wait long, luckily. Rocket, Groot, and Drax showed up – Rocket with his fur singed, Groot with scorch marks on his bark, and Drax covered in blood and wild-eyed – and thirty seconds later they were back in space, clearing the planet's gravity and making the hyperjump back to Knowhere.
“You failed to stop them?”

“They got away clean. Just as you ordered.”

“Good.”

“We lost some...”

“That is to be expected. Better now than later, I'm afraid.”

“...yes, of course.”

“Do you have some objection to my methods, Karcath? Perhaps you think you can do better?”

“No, I don't think that at all.”

“Good to hear it. Until next time.”

The thrill of the fight had long since faded, and Loki now lay on his bunk in the cramped little room. Jane was still getting her arm seen to (and likely peppering the medics with questions about how their equipment worked) but Loki had suddenly found all the activity maddening. He'd always been prone to these turns of mood, torn between demanding attention for his actions and wanting to reject any and all company. Sif and the rest of his family were the only people he could tolerate for any length of time.

But they were all far away, and though Jane seemed certain, Thanos had awakened Loki's doubt, and he could not help turning it over in his mind, worrying at it until it became a hard, dark thing of despair.

He glanced at the door, listened for a moment to make sure there were no footsteps approaching. This was not something he wanted to share with just anyone happening by.

Assured that he would be undisturbed for a few moments, Loki relaxed back and summoned his magic. Green tendrils snaked outward from his raised fingers and coalesced beside him, and if he had not just conjured the illusion himself he would not have known it was not truly Sif beside him. The mattress did not dip, of course, and though he hovered his fingers over her cheek he could not touch her. She appeared as she had the morning they had gone to the SHIELD facility in Harstad, with her hair loose and mussed with sleep. As upset as they had been, she had still smiled at him, their responsibilities far away for the moment.

He could feel her, if he searched for the bond. It was a distant thing stretched too far, but she was at the other end of it, and knowing that sustained him.

“Loki?”

The illusion vanished in a flash of green light, and he twisted quickly to see Jane standing in the open doorway. Her jumpsuit top was tied around her waist, and white bandages around her arm. He sat up, a smile he did not mean sliding easily onto his face.

“I see their healing capabilities are leaps and bounds behind Asgard's,” he said. “Still, you will have use of it, surely?”
“My arm’s fine. And there’s something else, but...” she shrugged, stepping inside so the doors could close behind her. “You miss her, don’t you.”

“Do you not miss Thor?”

“Of course I do.” She sat beside him without asking, and though he sighed theatrically in protest, Loki allowed her to. “But he told me what you were like before. It’s okay to admit that you’re a little lost without Sif around.”

It cost him dearly to say it, but the words were out before he could stop them. “More than a little, I’m afraid.”

To her credit, Jane didn’t mock him with that slip—though, he realized, she had no reason to. “Fair enough. We’ll get back to them. I mean, we already had motivation, but...”

“But?”

Jane laughed a little. It had a hysterical edge to it, but there was genuine happiness there too. “I’m pregnant again. So, you know, if I don’t want to be running around the universe with a stomach comically out of proportion to my body...”

“You certainly couldn’t shoot like you did today.”

“Don’t tell me you would put me in some kind of magic bubble.”

“To preserve the less irritating state of being my brother has reached? I would do many, many things to maintain the way things are, Jane, for they benefit me greatly.” The uncomfortably honest moment passed, Loki eyed her. “You did fight quite admirably, though. Worthy of a seat in Valhalla.”

“After all that business with Surtur, I decided it might be good to learn how to shoot. Natasha’s been teaching Pepper, Sif, and I.”

“I am not sure how I feel about her.”

“Natasha?”

“No, Pepper.”

“If you feel terrified, then that’s just fine. She gets really intense with a gun.” Jane paused, then leaned in and hugged him. “If you need some time alone, tell me. Otherwise I’m not even going to know, and you’re just going to get more prickly.”

“I am not prickly.”

“Whatever, Your Worship.”

* 

“So,” Peter said the next day as they all stood in the ship’s hold. “Me, Loki, and Drax are going to go in and grab this Orb from the tomb, and Gamora will fly the ship and keep an eye out for any security or other incoming nasties. Understand?”

“ Inspiring leadership,” Loki stage-whispered as they waited in the hold of the ship.

“I like to write my speeches before I give ’em. Make sure it’s full of useless BS, you know?”
“Actually, yes.”

The ramp lowered and air rushed out of the hold, and following Peter's lead, Drax and Loki put on their breather masks. Gamora's voice crackled through their earpieces, clinical and cool. “We're past the outer security measures for the tomb field. Range to drop, four hundred meters. Get ready to jump.”

“There it is,” Peter said, pointing to one tomb hovering in a cluster of five. “We'll jump onto the landing pad and head in.”

The ship jerked suddenly, shuddering to one side, and everyone quickly gripped something to keep their balance. “Gamora?” Peter asked. “Everything okay up there?”

“Coming under fire from other tombs. It's automated. No living targets. Going evasive... you're all gonna have to jump quickly, Quill. One hundred fifty meters to drop.”

The ship jerked again right after the sound of an explosion filled the hold, and they were all knocked about.

“Fifty meters,” Gamora said. “Make it quick, boys.”

The tomb appeared before them, huge and gray and crumbling at the edges. It didn't look far, but the actual surface of the planet was far below them, and visible in the gap between the end of the ramp and the edge of the landing pad that no family had ever visited. Peter pointed to himself, then Loki, then Drax, and jumped. When it was his turn Loki hesitated a moment – the ground was far below after all – but Drax grabbed the back of his jacket and threw him forward, and with a little quick spellwork Loki made the edge of the landing pad and rolled to standing.

Peter was laughing as Loki dusted himself off. “Graceful!”

“I doubt you did much better.”

Drax landed, and the three of them headed toward the entrance of the tomb. “This place was never occupied, was it?” the tattooed Drax asked.

“Unless you count this Orb thing as an occupant.”

“It could be. The Tesseract has its own mind, so perhaps this extends to the other Stones. Nothing I read could tell me clearly.”

The door to the tomb was closed, strange-looking markings covering it. “The door's probably on some kind of lock,” Peter said. “Look for a keypad we can hack...”

There wasn't anything nearby, and the distant explosions and booms from the security systems of the other tombs trying to bring down their ship made their search much more urgent. After another fruitless search of the area around the door, Loki straightened, looking at the markings on the door. They weren't just decorative, there was definite structure. He ran a hand over them, clearing away grime and dust. It looked similar to some dialects the light elves of Alfheim used, and he could pick out a few words, but he wasn't sure of them.

“What language is this?”

Peter glanced over. “It doesn't have a name,” he said. “But it's old. Like, really old. Like the Celestial whose head is now occupied by Knowhere old.”
“Can you read it?”

“Uh...” He squinted at it. “Natural state, sought by all... without me, you will fall!”

“A riddle,” Drax rumbled.

Their earpieces crackled again. “We’re getting some heavy fire here, so if you all could just hurry up,” Gamora snapped.

“Working on it, sweetheart,” Peter replied. “Answers, anyone?”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “It is a simple riddle. The answer is ‘balance.’”

“Simple, he says... okay, talk to the doors, make them open.”

With what he felt was the appropriate flair, Loki said, “Balance,” to the doors. They stayed closed.

“Boys,” Gamora muttered in their ears.

“Okay, why isn’t it working?”

“Perhaps it needs to be in the language,” Loki replied. “Most of these kinds of spells require that.”

“It’s not magic.” But Peter thought a moment, and then said something in another language. The door slid open with a grinding shriek of frozen metal, and there was a distant series of clicks as lights inside came on.

Through the door, on a bier where a body would lie, there was only a small pedestal and floating above it, a glowing white orb. Something in the back of Loki’s skull began to tingle, spreading outward and pressing against the backs of his eyes. He lowered his head, looking anywhere else, and the tingling subsided.

“That must be it,” he said.

“You brought the box, right?”

Loki conjured up the container they’d fashioned for the Orb and handed it off, leaving Peter and Drax to take the Orb and instead walking over to one of the walls. They were covered in the same language, and he ran his fingertips over it. The fact that he could understand words here and there was maddening; he made a mental note to find a book on the language and learn it, if it was to be a part of their quest to get home.

His fingertips faltered as they found not more words, but a carved relief image. It was an orb, flecks of white paint still clinging to the stonework. Loki glanced at the Orb as Peter wrestled it into its box, and pulled plant growth from the wall as he went. The Orb... there, a cube in blue that could only be the Tesseract, a red cloud so intricately worked that it appeared to move, a shaded oval, a rectangle with a crude outline of a torso in it, a triangle with lines coming out of one side, and in the center, a hand.

I know this, Loki thought. The Gauntlet is safe in Asgard’s Vault, though, with the Tesseract.

There was more to the image, and he pulled more vines off the wall, looking for the rest. Lines led outward, more images—

The floor bucked under his feet, and he caught himself against the wall. From behind him, Peter yelled, “Time to go!”
“But these carvings—“

“Forget them! I don’t want to get blown up!”

With one last look at the relief still mostly covered by vines, Loki turned and left the tomb. The entire structure was heaving beneath their feet. “What did you do, Peter Quill?”

“There were gold—“

“You tried to rob the tomb? Do you realize you probably set off some kind of trap, you idiot?”

“I realize that now! Gamora!” Peter pressed his palm to his ear, searching the skies for their ship. “We’ve got it, get over here now!”

“Busy, Peter!”

Across the sky and below them, they watched a tomb’s automated security take shot after shot at the ship. Each one detonated long after Gamora had evaded them, leaving a trail of expanding clouds of smoke, but it kept her from getting close to them, and they all heard her grunt of frustration as the tomb heaved upward and slid to the side, moving past the others in the cluster.

“Gamora! Now!”

“I can’t get up to your altitude, I’ll get shot down! You’ll have to jump down to me!”

“Are you joking—”

“Not unless you want to stay there for the rest of your pitiful human life, Quill!”

“Damn it, Gamora!” But Peter went to the edge of the landing pad and peered down as Gamora brought the ship around in a long arc. “Tell us when to jump!”

“Do one of us per pass—“

“Not enough time! The more times I come by, the more chances the security has to blow us all out of the sky.”

“I can get us there,” Loki said, gritting his teeth as the floor shook through his boots again. Peter and Drax stared at him for a moment, and Loki held their gazes. “I don’t want to die,” he added. “It sounds boring.”

“Fine. Gamora, tell us when!”

“Stand by.” The whine of engines increased in volume, and the three men all braced themselves to jump. Loki called the spells to mind, held them on his tongue and savored the tang.

“Now!”

They leaped into space, eyes squinted against the rush of air. Below them the ship had slowed and they tried to match its trajectory. Loki clenched his jaw as he rushed toward the top side of the ship, and grunted through clenched teeth when he hit. Gripping a metal loop he reached out to where Peter was arrowing downward but slightly off course; tendrils became strong ropelike coils and shot out, and clenching his fist, Loki pulled his arm back. Peter hit the top of the ship and crawled toward an access hatch. Loki turned to Drax and repeated the same spell, pulling him in to the ship. The three of them tumbled through the access hatch onto the floor of the cargo hold, and Groot reached up and pulled it closed.
“They’re in!” Rocket said into the intercom near the door. “Hit it, Gamora!” Everyone braced themselves as the rockets fired and Gamora took them up through the atmosphere and into the safety of space.

Still on his back on the floor, Loki turned his head and looked at Peter. “Do you have it?” Peter twisted, showing Loki the locked canister they had put the Orb into.

“Gamora,” he said breathlessly. “You are one hot pilot. Seriously, can I take you out to dinner?”

“Maybe if you ask a little more nicely,” she replied over the intercom.

“Not a no. Take us home.” Peter sat up, pulling the canister into his lap. “One down, five to go.”
**Spacetime**

Chapter Notes

Finally, an update! We're back on Earth and with Sif this time, setting up for more events. Enjoy!

*spacetime;* any mathematical model that combines space and time into one interlocked continuum.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You know,” Sif grumbled, sitting back from the table, “I am beginning to wonder if this is not all some little trick the Norns are playing upon us in a grand scheme to shorten the skein of my life by half.”

Thor looked up from where he'd been leaning over a map of Vanaheim and its moons, muttering to himself. “Don't even jest,” he said. “Asgard would be far poorer without you, and I could not hope to muddle through all this alone. Why I ever thought I could take the throne...” he trailed off, running his hands over his face. “There is nothing here that can be attacked directly or blasted to pieces by lightning. I am hopeless.”

“Nonsense. You are being quite useful in keeping me from going utterly mad right now.” Wistfully looking at the pitcher of chilled wine collecting condensation on a nearby table, Sif reached instead for her goblet of water. It was mid-autumn in Asgard, which meant one last blast of heat before the season turned toward winter, and she felt as though she was suffocating. “It feels as though there is a linchpin here, something that we could pull out and use to disable the whole apparatus if we could but find it. That is the most maddening part.”

Thor eyed her as he pulled another map toward him and began making notes on reported movements of bands of mercenaries. “Perhaps I could just smash the entire apparatus and free us of it.”

“It would certainly be easier. But at this point if we destroy it we destroy ourselves. There is a traitor somewhere in our midst, Thor...”

“And with us distracted by Jane and Loki going missing, we cannot focus on finding them.”

When they finally broke for the day – Thor had to go see to Lena, feeling guilty about leaving her with Frigga so often, and between the heat and her pregnancy Sif was more easily exhausted than usual – she left feeling even more burdened than before. She felt no closer to being able to effectively protect her home or bringing Loki back than she had been this morning, and as she was painfully climbing stairs despite the attempts of her guards to direct her to one of the gilt platforms that would have easily moved her between levels, she heard the distant crackle and rumble of the Bifrost activating.

“Another patrol returning?” she asked. One of her guards nodded.

“They were on one of Vanaheim's moons, my queen,” he said. “Tygghold. The fighting has spread.”

Sif watched the guard for a moment. “You are from Tygghold.”
“I am.” The guard shook his head. “Forgive me, Lady Sif, I—“

“No. If I do not know the fears of my people, what kind of leader am I?” Sif smiled, inviting the guard to walk beside her. “Tell me of your home. I have never been to Tygghold, and I would know more.”

The guard – his name was Ralf, she had found out, and he had grown up on his family’s farm near one of Tygghold’s greater mountain ranges before joining the Einherjar and distinguishing himself enough to become one of the Royal Guard. She heard of Ralf’s brothers and sisters – some too young to leave home yet, the sister who idolized her queen, the brother who only wanted to see Asgard and Midgard, the hardworking parents who gave all they had to their children. When they reached her bedchambers she startled both guards by bowing her head to them.

“You have a good home, Ralf,” she said, “And good parents. I will do what I can to protect them. Write to your sister – I have need of another handmaiden, and the one I have needs a friend. Arla is from Vanheim itself, but I think they will get along.”

Ralf broke at least three of the rules of a Royal Guardsman on duty and smiled broadly at her, bowing deeply. “She would love nothing more than to come serve you, Lady Sif. And it would please Mother and Father to know she is safe in the city.”

“You.” She bade them both take their posts outside her door, and at last she was alone.

Rida and her army of underlings had been in here since Sif had risen and left for her day; the bed was made, clothes were put away, there were fresh towels in the bathing room, and all the general clutter that Sif either couldn’t reach or was too tired to deal with had been put away. The knife she’d flung at the wall had even been pulled out and placed on the little table. Sif touched the groove in the wall, a scowl twisting her lips, before she picked up the knife, meaning to put it away with the rest. Before she could turn away fully, though, something caught her eye.

Before they had left for Midgard, Sif had nearly tripped over one of the books Loki had left on the floor. This had elicited a mild panic in her – what if she had fallen on her stomach and hurt their child? - and there had been a very heated discussion immediately after about how his absentmindedness might mean broken bones and if he could not learn to clean up after himself (if she did not know by now that he was often far too preoccupied with more important matters and why did they have servants if not to clean up after them) because he went into moods anytime someone put one of his precious books away in the wrong place he obviously needed to change his habits before he could be any sort of responsible parent. Loki had conceded, or knuckled under, or humored her, and had reorganized his reading material into safer, more out-of-the-way piles, or relocated it to his study and receiving room. Sif dared not go into either of those places unaccompanied, and when she had been in moods herself had taken to standing in the doorway and yelling for Loki to come escort her through the mountains of chaos that he routinely built and destroyed over the course of a day. But he had kept some of special interest to him in their bedchamber, and the gold-embossed title of one had glittered just so in the light.

Sif picked it up (imagining with a pang that Loki was about to look up from a different tome entirely and irritably tell her to put that down otherwise he’d forget where it was, Sif) and ran her thumb over the runes on the cover. The Realms Beyond the Realms. He had been reading it in London, before they had left for Norway. He’d vanished it when she’d approached where he sat, and another pang of heartache hit her when she thought about how he’d looked up at her then. But it was quickly forgotten as she thought more about that night.

“You’ve read this before,” she’d said. What was so important about it that he would keep it so close?
Curious, Sif took the book over to one of the couches bathed in noonday sun and sat down to read.

* 

They had ended up taking some rooms in a hotel that was threadbare but clean. The owner had recognized them and started babbling in Russian, trying to convince them to leave and go elsewhere, somewhere nicer, but Natasha had somehow convinced him this was where they intended to be and could they just get their room keys, they'd made a particularly long flight, and oh, if he could do them the favor of keeping their presence to himself, there might be a reward in it for him. That had, unsurprisingly, quieted all protests, except for Tony's, who seemed destined to whine so much that even Steve felt on the verge of losing his patience as they sat around and waited for Natasha to get back from her reconnaissance trip. Clint had gone with her as a silent and distant guard, so they lacked even the buffer of his sarcasm to keep Tony at bay.

“Ukraine sucks,” Tony said, flipping through the five static-filled channels on the television for the twentieth time. “This hotel sucks. Why are we here? We could be anywhere else.”

Bruce, carefully organizing their detection equipment close to the window, gave Tony a very tense look, and Steve finally spoke up.

“Can you be quiet? Please?” he said, and regretted the snap in his voice almost immediately – Tony's usual reaction to that kind of thing was to take it as either entertainment or a challenge, and neither Steve nor Bruce had anything left in them to deal with it – but to his surprise, Tony turned off the television and flopped back on the bed, and there was blessed silence in the room for a few minutes.

“This is just fucked up,” he mumbled at last.

“Natasha said that staying here—“

“Nah, it's not even staying here. It's this whole thing that made us have to be here. Norway, seeing Loki and, and Jane...” he raised his arm and made a gesture in the air above his head. “Fucked up. I've never seen Thor look that sad. It's like the universe kicked the cutest puppy.”

Steve watched Tony out of the corner of his eye. For all that the man was infuriating and self-centered, he could be remarkably... sympathetic. Just in offensive and ridiculously overpriced ways.

“We’re doing what we can to fix it,” he said at last. “That’s why we’re here.”

“I know. It just doesn’t... feel like enough.”

Bruce spoke up, and though his voice sounded tightly controlled it didn’t seem like he was in any danger of showing them his bad side. “You can’t just throw money at this problem and make it go away, Tony,” he said. “That’s what’s got you frustrated. This isn’t a new suit or a new piece of tech. It’s trying to figure out how to return people home from across the universe, or trying to find people who have lived with the underground for a long time. It’s not like any of us are really experienced in stopping interplanetary resource smugglers, anyway.”

Steve snorted. “We could write the book on half the things that have become normal since Asgard made contact.”

“We did write the books,” Tony shot back. “Or do you not remember having to get up in front of that room full of skeptical sheriffs and tell them the best way to deal with having a Bifrost site in their jurisdictions?”

“What fun that day was.”
They all looked over to see Natasha and Clint coming back through the door, shedding coats and hats as they did. Natasha had turned up with a wig in an unremarkable blonde color, and she took that off too, carefully putting it back on a Styrofoam head. Steve sat up.

“What’s the news?”

“We’ve got a lead on a drop that’s supposed to happen tonight.” Natasha leaned over one of the gadgets on the rickety table and tapped a few keys on the holographic keyboard. A map of Kiev appeared in the air, and they all came over to look at it. She spread her hands, making the map zoom in on a particular area, and indicated one building. “Here, in a vacant warehouse, 73 Kostyantynivska.” She clucked her tongue. “So cliché.”

“At least it’s something we can easily lay a plan out for. It’s not like we haven’t all hit warehouses before.” Steve reached out and shifted the map around, studying approaches and surrounding buildings. “Did you scope out the area?”

“A little bit. There are some very intimidating-looking guards trying to be inconspicuous in the area, though. I had to be sneaky.”

“What a hard life you have,” Tony muttered. “How’s it look, Itsy Bitsy?”

“The whole area is controlled by a crime syndicate, led by a guy they call the Swan. He’s bosom buddies with some mysterious guy who he’s been buying refined Asgardian steel from, according to my contact. He doesn’t trust this seller, so he’s arriving with some muscle tonight, mostly because last night some of his guys were killed by a rival gang that, surprisingly enough, also had Asgardian steel-tipped bullets.”

“Someone’s sewing chaos around here.” Bruce crossed his arms. “How are we going to do this? It’ll be pretty conspicuous if Tony or I show up. Or even Steve, I mean, he wears the American flag on his whole body.”

“I don’t need a suit to be Captain America,” Steve replied. “Though I’ll be pretty exposed.”

Tony was staring into the middle distance. “I’ll have to design something for you,” he muttered. “Maybe with that weird cloth that Thor brought back once, that stuff that the running community’s going nuts for…”

“I don’t need you to design me a suit that can, I don’t know, walk my dog for me.”

“You don’t have a dog. You have fish.”

“Not anymore,” Natasha cut in, her voice sweet. “They died.”

“Wow, Cap. Wow.”

“Can we get back on track, please?” Steve took a last look at the streets around the warehouse. “Bruce, you’ll be our director again. As much as I want you out there with us, you’re right, it’d be too conspicuous if you Hulked out here when we’re trying to run undercover. Tony, do you think you could stand not to be the center of attention for a while?”

“I’m a team player. Sure—what?” Everyone around him had snorted, and Tony looked offended. “I can do it!”

“Could you get up to altitude and keep an eye on things? Relay information down to Bruce?”
“I guess I can, yeah.”

“Clint, I want you covering the front. I’ll cover the back… and Natasha, you’ll be the one to go in and get eyes on what’s going on out there. You’re the best at that.”

“Ten-four, Boss. The drop’s supposed to happen at ten o’clock tonight.”

“Then we’ll be in position by quarter to. Everyone get some sleep, prepare, whatever you need to do. We’re heading out at eight.”

* 

Thor found her much later, when the sun had set behind the mountains around the city and the dinner hour had come and gone. Some servant had put a plate of food beside her and when Thor put his hand on her shoulder, Sif was startled to see she’d eaten most of the food there. She had little memory of doing so (and doubtless there were now little smears on the margins that would send her husband into conniptions whenever he found his way home) but her mind was full of other things.

“You look troubled,” Thor told her when he sat down, sorting through the remains of fruit on a golden plate. “That cannot be particularly joyful reading.”

“Truly it is not.” Sif closed the book, a finger in to mark her place. “Loki was reading this just before we went to the Norway installation on Midgard.”

Thor turned his head to read the title, his brow furrowed. “What is it?”

“It speaks about our Nine Realms… and more, worlds beyond Yggdrasil’s reach…”

“Beyond…? Is that possible?”

“Apparently so. I did not know there was anywhere Yggdrasil’s branches did not go until… what happened.” Lately she had found herself welling up in inexplicable tears, waking up from nightmares and reaching for Loki only to remember that he was so far from her the spells binding them together felt as taut as a band stretched out to its breaking point. She feared that band snapping. “But it seems there are hundreds, thousands of worlds beyond.”

“Does it say how to reach them? If we reach them, we could…” but he quieted sadly when Sif shook her head.

“It does not. But it speaks also of these things called the Infinity Stones.” She opened the book again, flipping back until she laid it out on the table between them. “There were six, see here? All of different properties, all sources of incredible, nearly limitless power.” She touched one of the sketches. “The Tesseract is one. It can bend space, make long distances short and short distances take an age to cross. The book warns of its… enthralling capacity, but all the Stones seem to have the ability to ensnare… I do not know this word’s translation well, it is in a strange dialect that has taken me time to puzzle out, but I think it means something like bearer or host.”

“The Tesseract nearly ensnared Loki before, did it not?” Thor scanned the page. “And the rest of these…?”

“One is the Aether, lost after Asgard’s war with Malekith and Svartalfheim. It took the form of a strange fluid, or perhaps mist. There are… others, here. But they are unknown to me. They probably never came to Asgard. But they were once held together.”

“This gauntlet is in the Vault. I have seen it before, when I have been there with Father and Loki.”
“I have seen it there too,” Sif said grimly, and rose to her feet. “I am going to go down there, Thor. I must, to see if the gauntlet can offer me any clues about how to bring our family home.”

*

Steve rolled his shoulders, adjusting the makeshift harness they’d rigged for his shield. Natasha turned out to be pretty handy with a needle and thread – she’d said something about a super spy’s image being tarnished if her stealth suit had a rip – and Clint had wandered off and returned with form-fitting black clothing for him, pants with stretch and a long-sleeve shirt, work boots. Bruce had been set up with his communication equipment, Tony had flown off muttering about Asgardian textiles and their tensile capabilities, and with the disappearance of Natasha and Clint, that left Steve to get himself into position as quickly and quietly as possible.

They had arrived with some supplies, and he was glad for that when he clicked his mic to communicate that he was in position.

“Mental note to update the list of gear to bring with us when we travel,” he heard in his ear, and sighed. Tony was still muttering, but at least he’d changed to a more useful tack. “Captain, those pants do nothing for your figure.”

Steve thought he heard a quiet snort on the line, quickly suppressed. Probably Natasha.

“You’re not going to walk the runway in any one of your suits,” Bruce said. “Okay, looks like we’ve got incoming. A couple black vans just drove past my position.”

“Tracking them, Data.”

“That’s not my code name.”

“I thought it was.”

“You weren’t paying attention when we came up with them.”

“…what am I?”

“Annoying,” Steve whispered. “Keep quiet on the line, gentlemen. Any time now, Red’s going to open up her comm so we can hear what’s going on.”

“Giant, how’s her camera feed? Does my little doohickey work?”

“So you were paying attention. Feed looks good, Tinker.” There was a pause. “She’s in, and so are our friends. They’re not doing anything though, just standing around in the courtyard.”

“Wonder what they’re waiting for.” Tony was quiet too, but his comm was still open; Steve could hear the faint sound of rushing wind. “They keep looking up. I don’t think they can see me, I’m—holy shit!”

“What? What’s going on?” Steve began running crouched over, just as the comms crackled again and he could hear voices speaking in Ukrainian, then English.

“…you would arrive,” someone was saying. “We doubted.”

“I made an arrangement. I always deliver to my clients.”

Bruce muttered, “He sounds Asgardian.”
“Sound like anyone we know?”

“They all sound like Brits to me, Tony. Do you think Asgard’s doing some kind of sting operation?”

“They didn’t say anything.”

“We’re not exactly on good terms right now,” Steve added. “Tony? Eyes on this visitor?”

“He’s wrapped up in some kind of dark cloak. I can’t get a full face shot.”

“Okay. See what you can do.”

Steve kept moving, trying to get close enough to see but keep Natasha and Clint safe. He could hear the conversation through his earpiece, but he wanted to take a look at their Asgardian visitor. Whoever this person was, he’d arrived without using the Bifrost, and the only other person he knew who could do that was Loki. At least that’s one person we can rule out. He’s somewhere in space.

When he found a good vantage point, Steve lay down on his belly and peered down at the gathering. Tony hadn’t been lying, the newcomer was swathed head to toe in black cloth. He’d brought some Asgardian crates with him, and they floated at hip level behind him. In his ear he listened to the deal going down.

“How much?” one of the Ukrainians asked.

“Oh, consider this an act of charity,” the Asgardian said. “I have heard of your cause and your need. Hopefully this little donation eases things somewhat.”

“It will help. We have an ace in our hole, though…”

“Then perhaps you see that this steel is distributed to other groups who need it. If I had any refined and shaped into those projectiles, I would tell you where to shoot at the people who are spying on us right now.”

“Shit,” someone – probably Tony, possibly Clint – whispered. Steve immediately stood up and started running toward them, just as he heard one of the Ukrainians laugh.

“We have made our own arrangements,” he said. “Observe.”

There was a sound of snapping fingers, and then a grunt of pain.

“That was Natasha.” Definitely Clint, definitely panicked. “Tasha?”

“Busy!” she ground out.

“She sounds fucking terrified,” Tony said. “I’m coming in.”

“No, not now, we have to—“

“Our cover’s already blown, Cap.” Steve heard the faint thwick thwick of Clint’s bow, and the clatter of arrows on concrete. “What’s the point?”

Steve grabbed his shield off his back and used it to smash through a skylight, landing on his feet and rolling. As soon as he was back up he was running, the sounds of scuffling and fighting getting closer.

“Visitor’s vanished again,” Tony said, the instant before a bright streak passed by one of the
windows nearby, ruining Steve’s night vision completely. “I’m going to get our nasty little friends.”

“Try to get one alive,” Steve panted. “I want to know what happened here.” He saw a blue flash on a catwalk above and to his left, and climbed onto the railing. “I’m going to help Natasha! The rest of you, stay safe, protect Bruce, and get out if you can.”

He leaped out into space, just as another blue flash from Natasha’s Widow’s Bite cast her and her assailant into sharp relief.

“Cap,” he heard her pant. “Get out while you can, get out, run—”

“I’m not going to leave you behind!”

“You can’t beat this one, Ca—aaargh!”

Steve watched, horrified, as Natasha flew back along the catwalk and crumpled against a wall. She coughed, groggy, but the man attacking her was already turning to look down at Steve. Against the dim light from the street lamps outside, the halogens inside the warehouse, and the flare of Tony’s suit, Steve saw only the glint of goggles. The rest was lost in shadow, except—

The man turned and leaped out through a rusted hole in the roof. “Hey!” Steve called out, following. “Get back here! Someone, backup!”

“Busy—” Clint began, but an explosion from near his position told Steve all he needed to know. With Tony hunting down an informant and Clint otherwise occupied, he was on his own chasing this one down. He put on a burst of speed, following the telltale glimmer he’d caught sight of, trying to think if he knew anyone with a metal arm.

They ran for long enough for Steve to start feeling the burn in his legs, to start wondering why this guy wasn’t tiring himself. Nobody except an Asgardian could keep up with him – the times he’d gone running with Loki and Sif, they’d even outpaced him easily and returned looking barely winded – but he was working to keep up. They were nearly to downtown now, there were more cars, more people, if he wasn’t careful he’d lose the guy entirely—

Steve skidded around a corner and swore, pushing through the crowd of concertgoers clustered around a theater. He didn’t see the goggles, the dark hair, or the metal arm anywhere.

“I lost him,” he said, turning back toward the warehouse. “Someone get Natasha, and let’s get back to the hotel. We need to debrief.”

“I’ll say.” Bruce sounded strained. “Good news, though. We got one.”

“Good. When everyone’s back and rested, I think we’ll all want to ask him some questions.”

*  

Thor hovered anxiously the whole way down through the palace. They took back stairways, the halls that the residents of the palace traveled when they did not wish to see the public, and eventually halls that the public was simply not allowed to go as they went deeper into the heart of the realm. And the whole way, Thor worried at her.

“Are you certain you should be coming down here?” he kept asking. “With the Tesseract in the Vault, and the Casket, and you with child…”

“You sound as bad as your brother,” Sif groused as they and their guards passed through the layers
of ensorcelled security on the Vault’s approach. “I am perfectly safe, I will be perfectly safe, and so will my child. Do you not think I swore to protect him when I found out I was pregnant? Honestly,” and she paused before the huge doors so the spells could recognize them and allow them to pass, “People seem to think that I intend to ride howling out into battle womb-first and naked…”

The guards took up their posts at either side of the door as Sif and Thor descended the steps into the Vault. Sif rarely came down here herself, though she did it more often than Loki would. He still fretted over how easily the Tesseract had tempted him, worried that there was some darkness in him that could not be shaken by the love he had found with her, but he had been the one to weave spells around the Vault (knowing and exploiting its weaknesses once before, he had known how to shore them up) when the Tesseract was placed there. But she had avoided the place since she had become pregnant, not wanting the influences of a strange cosmic trinket to harm her child.

But now Sif walked down the stairs with her chin up and her shoulders back, as she always did when facing the unknown. She would not let herself be cowed, and she had business here. The magic that bound her to the realm would protect her, and she would trust in it and the protections placed around the various unusual items in Asgard’s most secret collection.

“See?” she said to Thor as they came to the Vault floor. “It is safe.” Indeed, the Tesseract still glowed dully at the end of the Vault before the latticework wall. Thor still looked troubled.

“I do not trust it,” he muttered, before stepping ahead of her and into one of the alcoves. “Here is the gauntlet. See its stones?”

Sif came up beside him and studied the gauntlet. Burnished gold and large enough to dwarf even Thor’s hand, it shimmered in the torchlight of the Vault. There were six stones set into it – one at the base of every finger and the thumb, and one centered in the back of the hand. Was it her imagination, or did two of the stones seem to glitter more brightly than the rest?

“The book names them,” she said quietly. The Vault had that air where she felt she had to whisper as she pointed to each stone in turn. “Space, Power, Reality, Time, Mind, Soul. Six things that, if controlled, would give the one controlling them incredible power on their own. Combined, they could destroy us, enslave us…”

“The people of Midgard thought us gods.” Thor sounded as quiet as she did. “Stars above… whoever bore this gauntlet with the power of all six stones contained within it would truly be a god.”

“No wonder they were separated.”

She moved past Thor, toward the Tesseract. As she moved a pressure built in her head, as though she was climbing a great mountain. It was less than it had been four years ago in New Mexico, but it was steady and irritating, and though Sif stubbornly stood before the Tesseract as long as she could, daring it to reach out to her, she eventually turned away.

When they were safely back up in the main levels of the palace, Sif and Thor had a late dinner. Within her, the child stirred fretfully, and Sif stroked her belly as she ate. I hope you are all right, little love, she thought, fingers splaying out as she felt the baby move again. I hope nothing touched your little mind.

“The Tesseract is here,” Thor said, “And the Aether is gone, according to the stories of my grandfather. At least those two are out of the world.”

“Though I wonder if the imposter Tesseract that SHIELD created might have the same effect as the real thing.” Sif stared into her goblet of watered wine. Eir had insisted she eschew mead altogether
and only drink wine so weak it might as well have been juice, and truly she did not now think she
could handle stronger stuff anymore. “Certainly its property of bending space seemed unaffected by
the fact that it was unstable.”

“Should we return for that one? Keep it here as well?”

“Not now. We have other matters to attend to in the other realms.” Sif rubbed her forehead. “How
Loki does all this without going utterly mad, I do not know. Managing our armies is quite enough
work, but here I have to listen to people squabbling all day, knowing that things such as these
Infinity Stones are loose in the universe.”

“Loki manages because he is probably already mad, and we are all just too kind to see it.” Thor said
this so matter-of-factly that Sif laughed.

“As likely an explanation as any.”

“It is all right to say you miss him, you know. At least to me. I will tell no one.”

Sif looked at her friend and saw pain and longing, enough to match hers. If Thor could be flying
through the stars right now searching for Jane, she knew he would be. If she had a clue where to go
she’d have taken a ship and sailed along Yggdrasil’s trunk, sinking down to Hel itself if she thought
Hela knew where her husband might be.

“I do miss him,” she replied. “Every moment of every day. He is the other half of me, as Jane is your
other half.”

“If we did not have to keep the realms from erupting into civil war…”

“…we would both be out there.” Sif made a broad gesture encompassing the heavens. “Yes.”

She looked up at the stars as they came out, defying the brilliance of Yggdrasil to shine through
clouds of gas and dust. Somewhere out there, Loki searched for a way home. She would help him
find it, and together they would find a way to secure the safety of the Nine Realms.

* 

Natasha had been settled on one of the beds after being patched up by Bruce, and he still hovered
around her nervously as they all got together to talk.

“Did you find a place to put our guest?” Clint asked. His voice was hard. “I’ve got a few questions
to ask about the guy who attacked Natasha.”

“You don’t need to ask about him,” Natasha said. Her voice had only the barest hint of pain in it, and
that was all Steve needed to know to get an idea of how she was feeling. He’d seen her with awful
injuries and she’d never batted an eye… but now not only was she in pain, she was scared.

Tony was sitting in a chair, arms crossed and legs out in front of him, watching her. “What’s up,
Spider-Woman?” he asked. “You look like you’ve seen your own ghost.”

“I guess… I have, in a way.” Natasha shifted her position, winced. Clint reached toward her, but she
batted his hand away. “I know the man with the metal arm. Not by name, I was never told his real
name or if he even had one. But he was code named the Winter Soldier, and we worked together,
back…” she made a rolling gesture with her shoulders. “Before.”

“When you were shadier.”
“Yes, Stark, when I worked against everything SHIELD stands for now.”

“What do you know about him?” If they were going to be going against this guy while they were here, Steve thought, they should know as much as possible. Natasha bit her lip.

“Not a lot. Need to know, and all that. You understand.”

“Compartmentalization.”

“Exactly. He came out of the same people that ran the Black Widow program I was part of, the people I worked for who made me what I am. But they did… they did something else to him. I’m not sure what, but he’s strong, and smart, and well-trained. And… I pulled what SHIELD had on him, once I’d joined up. I wanted to know if they knew anything more. They didn’t, but their records went back to the 1950s.”

“Same guy? Not just some guy with the same title?”

“The same guy. So either there’s some kind of genetic manipulation going on, or this guy’s got powers.”

“Or they had him in deep freeze. You’ve got something in common with this dude if that’s true, Rogers, imagine that. Another Capsicle. You can start a support group.”

“Not funny.” Steve rubbed his jaw a moment, thinking. “What else did the files say?”

“The Winter Soldier’s responsible for dozens of kills in the whole time he’s been operating. High-level assassinations, strategic take-downs.” She grunted as she lifted her shirt, revealing an ugly scar. “He shot through me to get to the scientist I was guarding. Soviet slug, no rifling. The crop top trend is killing me.”

“My heart bleeds.” Tony, mercifully, quieted down for a few minutes, and Bruce didn’t waste the opportunity.

“I managed to hack into one of SHIELD’s satellites and download data on what was going on around the time that the Asgardian showed up,” he said, and tapped a few icons on his tablet, then swiveled the display to show them. “He hasn’t let us do much – which is surprising, given that he’s got an ego bigger than Tony’s – but the energy signatures are nearly identical to what’s given off when Loki does one of his disappearing tricks.”

“Too bad he’s not around to ask about it. I’m sure he’d give us an earful.”

“Or he’d stick his nose in the air and proclaim that we’re too dumb to understand it.”

“Nah, you just have to stroke his ego the right way.” Tony waved a hand. “Easy enough to do when you’re a narcissist yourself.”

“Well… that’s wonderful, but it doesn’t get us anywhere with either of our problems. I don’t think we’ll learn anything more until we talk to the guy we captured, either.”

“He’s got a nice little room in the hangar we’re storing the jet in. Kind of a roach motel, really.” Clint seemed savagely pleased about this, and Natasha eyed him.

“Don’t take out your romantic frustrations on the prisoner, Barton.”

“I am not--“
“Please,” Bruce muttered, turning back to his tablet and getting back to work. “We can all see it from a mile away.”

“What.”

“And we all think you’d be better off if you just worked things out with Darcy. This will-they, won’t-they crap is getting old.” Natasha made a face. “Doctor, do you have any painkillers that are better than the ones you gave me? I can still feel pain.”

“Sorry. Short of going out and hunting around on the thriving black market that I’m sure is around here, you’re out of luck.”

“Figures.” Natasha got comfortable, a grimace on her face. “The minute I want Tony’s mad scientist concoctions for hangovers, we’re halfway around the planet from them.”

*

Late that night, Steve quietly took Clint and went to the airfield. The hangar where Tony’s jet was stored was a bit removed from the rest, and had doors that rolled shut to keep out the elements. Which was good, because as they walked across the tarmac from where the taxi had left them, Steve began to see snowflakes drifting down around them.

*The Winter Soldier*, he thought, shoving his hands in his pockets. *Pretty on the nose for someone operating right now.*

“Do you think this guy actually knows anything?” Tony asked. His voice echoed as they crossed the hangar, the shadowy bulk of the jet looming over them as he did so. “I mean, it’d be pretty embarrassing if we got there and found out he was literally just a goon.”

“You can’t go in thinking like that. Positive thoughts, Stark.”

“That’s what all the books say.”

“And I read them, so… there you go.”

“There I go.” Tony pushed open a door, paused at the other end of the short hallway as he fished for keys. “I didn’t peg you for a self-help book person.”

“I went to sleep there was a war, I woke up to another.” Steve shifted uncomfortably. “It leaves its marks. Let’s just open the door, okay?”

Watery moonlight mixed with the streetlamp glow from outside, illuminating the man bound hand and foot to a chair in the middle of the room. Steve felt queasy – this wasn’t right, not exactly – but they had no other way of keeping him from running away or hurting them, and so it had to do. Had they been in any other situation…

But they weren’t, and he learned long ago that sometimes you had to choose between the two worst paths.

“Captain America,” the man said as soon as they pulled off his blindfold. “I thought it was you.”

“I wish I could chat more, but I’m sure you know what we’re here for.”

“You want information, but I am afraid you are about to be disappointed. We do not know who our mysterious benefactor is.”
“Be surprising if you did.” Tony leaned against the wall. “We’re more interested in why rather than who.”

“I would think it obvious why we want a metal that can cut through every substance on this planet.”

“We don’t care why you want it – we care why your friend wants to sell it to you.”

“Ah,” the prisoner smiled. “But surely you have heard what is going on in this country, no? Two great men such as yourself ought to know what Gregor Petrovich knows.”

“Not the question. Does Gregor Petrovich know what we’re really asking?”

“Why an Asgardian is betraying his own? Who can really know the mind of one of those people, really…”

“He’s got a point,” Tony said conversationally. “I don’t even pretend to know what goes on in Loki’s head anymore.”

“He hasn’t said anything about his motivation?” Steve pressed.

“Even if he has, why should I tell you? I have no incentive.”

“Letting you live isn’t enough motivation?”

“You are Avengers,” Gregor said with a shrug. “You do not kill if you can help it.”

“We don’t kill at all.”

“Perhaps you should start.”

“How about this.” Tony leaned over, his palms on Gregor’s knees. “You tell us what you know about this Asgardian, we’ll not only let you go, we’ll buy you off.”

“Tony, we don’t—“

“—negotiate with terrorists, I know. But I’ve provided arms to far worse characters than a pro-Russian mobster. And besides, it wouldn’t be the Avengers doing it, it’d be Tony Stark. Dick moves are expected from me.”

“You spend too much time with a certain Asgardian.” Steve crossed his arms. “Fine. Tell us about the Asgardian… and about the man with the metal arm.”

“I know more of him than of our otherworldly benefactor.” Gregor pursed his lips. “He has been a legend for decades. Those who require his services are approached by intermediaries, always under heavy… chemical influence, shall we say? They never remember their actions. Believe me, we have tried to backtrace them. The Winter Soldier, they call him, and he is a gift from the Russia that was.”

“So you hire him to help try and split off from Ukraine.”

“We hire him to keep nosy Americans out of our business. You all insist on interfering in affairs that are not yours. He stops you effectively, no?”

“And the Asgardian?”

“We only know him by his local code name, which in English is Shadow.”
“That’s the most cliché thing I have ever heard.”

“Makes him more difficult to backtrace than the Winter Soldier. He says he understands our desire to be part of Russia again, and is providing the aid that his superiors will not.”

Tony glanced at Steve, but he didn’t say anything, and Steve didn’t acknowledge it. “Anything else? Any knowledge of more meetups like the one we interrupted?”

“He tells us nothing of this sort. Why would he? We are not his people, we are his customers.”


When his wrists were free, Gregor turned to them. “My payment?”

“Oh, right.” Tony wore an entirely too smug grin when he reached into his pocket. “All I’ve got on me is a card worth about ten million Bitcoin. I hope you take that.”

“I want real money, Stark.”

“Hey, that is real money… if you’re in the States at select companies. Enjoy!”

They walked out and shut the door, throwing the latch. Steve listened to the muffled bangs on the door. “He won’t starve to death in there, will he?”

“Relax, Cap.” Tony slapped him on the shoulder and sauntered back down the hallway. “I put a screwdriver in there. I’m sure he can fit through the air ducts or the window if he’s really industrious.”

“Great.” They walked back through the dark hangar and out to their car. “Bitcoin, though? Really?”

“Money of the future, Uncle Sam. Better get on it.”

The ride back to the hotel was mostly quiet. Steve turned the whole thing over and over in his mind, especially Tony’s glance at the end.

“He said something that got you. Why?”

“What he said about Asgard refusing to get involved with either the Ukrainian loyalists or the pro-Russian groups. Loki was talking to me about it while we were tinkering one day.”

“You listen to his ranting?”

“He talks out loud, I stay up until four in the morning making shit. We’ve all got our little problems… anyway, he was saying that he and Sif had been approached while they were on one of their tours through the region. Privately approached by a pro-Russian separatist – there were like five people in the room, plus the guy asking for aid – and Loki and Sif turned them down. Said it wasn’t their fight and they had more than one realm, or whatever, to think about than one kingdom – his words, not mine – on only one realm out of the nine. Point is, a real limited group knew that had even happened, so how did our visiting angel know?”

“You think he’s one of their inner circle.”

“That’s always been their suspicion, anyway. That’s what Darcy said Sif told her, and that’s why travel to and from Asgard has been so restricted lately. They don’t want leakage.”

“Interesting. That limits their pool of suspects a lot.”
“Hopefully Sif gets there on her own too.” Tony pushed open the door when Steve parked and climbed out, shoving his hands in his pockets for the chilly walk to the elevators. “Otherwise we’re going to have people shooting each other with Asgardian steel bullets down here, and that’s going to make everyone upset.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's that! Questions/comments/squee are always welcome on tumblr - find me @teslatricity!
Ergosphere

Chapter Notes

Well, after taking a break following my sprint to the finish of Mischief and Mistletoe (and you guys should all go read the fics posted this year, they're amaze) I am back with another chapter of Relativity! Hold on to your butts, this is going to be a wild chapter.

*ergosphere*; a region of spacetime around a rotating black hole in which it is impossible to stand still. An object would have to move faster than the speed of light just to stand still when near the event horizon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The *Milano* vibrated slightly as it made hyperjump, the stars outside Knowhere intensifying and then streaking into brilliant light. Wedged against the ship’s hull, Loki watched the reflections play across the ceiling of the room and tried to slow his racing thoughts.

The orb contained an Infinity Stone; which one he still wasn’t sure of, but what he’d been able to glimpse on the walls of the tomb indicated it was likely the one associated with great power. The texts had always referred to that as the Orb, and he had read those enough to have committed them to memory. Attempting to summon his books from his bedside had only resulted in wasted energy and a foul mood, and neither one was conducive to returning home.

That hadn’t helped his mindset going into this latest trip. Having already been close to the influence of an Infinity Stone, he knew he would be more susceptible to their lures, and the one on the ship right now called to him, and when he would not come, it reached into his mind and pulled at the things foremost in his mind. Sif, ruling Asgard alone and oblivious to the dangers waiting for their chance at Asgard, unaware of the fact that she sat on a throne just hundreds of feet above two of the most desirable objects in the universe. Their child, growing larger, ever closer to coming into a world that could end before they ever got a chance to live. Jane had been holding up better than he had, which had caused him no end of bitter amusement. In typical fashion she had put her chin up and her shoulders back and barreled into planning and researching where the other Infinity Stones might be and where they might take them so they would be safe from Thanos. Amusing that a mortal might be so resilient (or at least better at appearing that way) than one such as he, but Jane had told him that he had more than a few distractions, and then she’d pushed a book under his nose and told him she needed a translation.

That was how they had gotten off on this latest trip. With the Infinity Stone still in their possession – nobody knew quite what to do with it, so Peter had put it in a box and locked it in a secure cabinet near his bunk – they were flying off to another planet to track down a second. He let his head tilt back against the hull and closed his eyes, pulling the information out of his memory.

The Orb and the Tesseract were accounted for, as was the gauntlet that had long ago been forged to channel their power. Jane’s research and his translating indicated they were likely on the trail of the Stone associated with a mirror. Legend had it that this mirror hung in a temple and any who looked into it for too long would die and be taken to the afterlife, and others who looked into the mirror thereafter could see them going about their lives in heaven. Other legends held that it could take the essence of a person and leave their physical being an empty husk while their spirit remained trapped
in the mirror, all of which sounded like the kind of thing an all-powerful cosmic object could do.

“Are you all right?”

Loki snapped out of his thoughts. Gamora was leaning against one of the support struts nearby, her arms crossed. She reminded him rather strongly of Sif at that moment – he’d often seen his wife standing nearly that same way, watching him pace and mutter over some problem or a stubborn translation. “Do not let Peter Quill hear you inquiring after my well-being,” he replied. “He’ll get the wrong idea, I’m certain.”

“Let him. We’re friends – partners – but I am my own woman.” She hooked a stool with her foot and pulled it over, sitting down. “It’s that thing we’ve got, isn’t it?”

“Do you feel it too?”

Her eyes unfocused for a moment. “It’s like… a buzzing in the back of my head. Like I’ve dived to the bottom of a lake. It’s unpleasant and distracting.”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it.” Loki stretched his legs out in front of him. “And here we are on our way to find another.”

“Better us having them than Thanos.”

“Quite true.” Loki eyed her. “I sense that your relationship with our purple menace is quite… complex.”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it.” Gamora smiled a bit crookedly. “He made me what I am, but what I am and who I am are quite different. He knows well how to take things away – pieces of you that he can pry loose to make you what he wants you to be – but he cannot take all of you away.”

“Is this counsel or counseling?”

“Bit of both. You’ve had this look in your eyes since we picked you up, I know it pretty well. He’s trying to get into your head, he wants you for something.” She leaned forward, her knuckles fading a bit as her hands clenched. “Don’t let him in.”

“I’ll endeavor to remember that.”

“Good.” She leaned back, took a breath, and in the next moment her posture and demeanor were normal again. “What do you know about this thing we’re going to get today? Peter said we were going after a mirror, and I thought he was just after something so that he can look at himself from all angles…”

Several hours later, Gamora crossed her arms, staring with her eyebrows raised at the mirror hanging quite innocently on the wall in front of them. “You’re twitchy because of this?” she asked.

“If it had a sign above it saying I am an Infinity Stone it would have been gone a long time ago, wouldn’t it?” Loki replied tartly. Peter and Drax had tried to pry it off the wall to no avail, and Jane was hesitant to get closer on account of her pregnancy (which he couldn’t fault her for) so it was left to Loki to figure out what to do with it. “Must I do everything for you lot?”

“Shut up and figure it out, Sparkle Fingers,” Peter yelled from where he was nosing around one of the dusty piles in the temple.
“Try not to trigger any security traps this time, Peter Quill.” Ignoring the low whispering in his ears, Loki stepped up to the mirror. It was simply wrought, not nearly as ornate as the Orb or as eerily beautiful as the Tesseract. It seemed quite ordinary in fact, a slightly tarnished mirror with a rusting metallic frame, shiny from where many fingers had touched it...

“Ah,” he muttered, and ran his fingers over part of the frame. There was a click, and the wall slid down silently to reveal a room beyond. In the center of the room, a mirror glimmered in a pillar of light.

“This seems too easy,” Jane said. “Groot, could you put me down, I’ve gotten this section—this whole room is covered in some kind of advanced mathematics, it’s fascinating--”

“It probably is too easy,” Rocket said. “I vote Loki goes in and deals with it.”

“Not an unexpected request.”

“I’ll go with him,” Gamora said grimly, and together they stepped across the threshold into the room.

The air was stale, and though there was a clear path he could see that the corners of the room were piled high with bones darkened with age. Some still had tattered pieces of clothing on, and the closer they got to the mirror the more the skeletons seemed to have fallen in place, as though the beings that had made it into this inner sanctum had simply laid down and let themselves die. Hardly a comforting thought.

“Do you need the containment box?” Gamora asked when they got up to it. Loki hesitated, his hand hovering above the mirror. Its surface was so highly polished it seemed to ripple with the light beaming down on it, and he shifted, looking at his reflection in it. His reflection grinned up at him.

“Half a moment,” he said quietly. His reflection was walking away now, and really, it couldn’t hurt to watch a bit longer, just to be sure. “This could be another decoy.”

The mirror showed him still, but it was as though he was watching a holographic record. He walked the halls of the palace in Asgard, and all who he passed bowed and smiled, pleased to see their king, all loyal to him and his family, his queen and his heirs—

Something passed across his vision, and the spell was broken. Loki’s whole body shuddered, and as his mind cleared he saw Gamora gingerly rolling something into the containment box they’d brought along. The fuzz in his mind dulled and became manageable, but only just.

“Got it,” Gamora told him grimly. She waved the box at him. “Come on, we’ve got to figure out what to do with these things.”

* 

The swirling lights in Sanctuary preceded the arrival of his informant, and Thanos turned his throne above to face the cloaked figure on the broad stone platform.

“You could drop this pretense of secrecy,” he said. “After all, I know your face and mind better than you do.”

“It’s the principle of it,” his informant replied. The dim and insane light of Thanos’ space made the shadow of the man’s hood even deeper. “I believe I have located the Aether. Bor was clever, and had it hidden in a pocket of space on a far-flung moon at the tips of Yggdrasil’s reach, but he was not clever enough for me.”

“Will it not be safer here with you, Lord?”

“Are you questioning me?”

“No, merely ensuring that your will is carried out in the best way. I will keep it in Asgard, of course. There are many places deep in the realm that I have access to.”

“Then see it ensconced there. Your king and your mortal princess are quite resourceful, you know; they’ve acquired two Infinity Stones for me.”

The cloaked man straightened. “Asgard’s rulers were thorough in their methods of hiding and erasing mention of the Infinity Stones in the generally accessible tomes in our libraries. I have had to do much research, and I fear that I cannot fully trust any member of my sympathizers. They are courtiers with their own ambitions, and if it became more profitable to turn me in they would do so.”

“It is a risk you knew might be taken when you came to me. But I’m certain that will all be wiped clean as soon as our little task is complete here, yes?”

“It is my hope, Lord Thanos.”

“Continue on as we have discussed, then. And other matters in the Realm Eternal?”

“Nothing is quite as stable as our queen wants it to be.” The man paused, and the smirk on his face was audible in his voice. “Perhaps it is time, but it will be as you command.”

“No, I quite agree. My guest grows restless, and I must let him out to play. I think it will be quite a shock for Asgard.” A faint roar from far below – or far away – echoed through Sanctuary, and Thanos smiled a bit wider. “Do tell me how it goes.”

“I shall. By your leave, then.”

Thanos waved a hand, and the man stepped back through one of his portals. After a sufficient time had passed, he summoned the Other.

“I believe it is time to begin moving more aggressively against our pests,” he said. “They now hold two of the Stones, and it would hardly do for them to find a safe place to keep them.”

“Nowhere in the universe is safe from you, my lord.”

“Quite true, but there are certain places that would make it difficult to achieve my ends. And with the Asgardian king still traveling with my estranged daughter and the rest of that ragtag band… I cannot have his mind influenced too strongly, do you understand?”

“I do. Shall I collect him for you?”

“Yes, it is nearly time. I would not want him to find his way back to Asgard without me.”

“And the Guardians?”

“Kill them,” Thanos replied immediately. “Kill the mortal, and bring Gamora back to me. I think she needs a lesson in how a properly grateful daughter behaves.”

*
“You can’t seriously be thinking that anywhere is safe for these things.”

For once, Loki was quite happy to sit back and let Jane get herself worked up. Not only was it hilarious to watch her tear into the others, but he was still feeling brittle from his encounter earlier. In any case, he agreed with everything she was yelling.

“How can you even destroy singularities that go back to the beginning of the universe?” Rocket asked. “I mean, I could try to blow them up—“

“Except one can’t be allowed to touch the surface of a planet, and the other will ensnare you in your own idyllic world the moment you look at it,” Gamora interrupted. “So that leaves us with very few options.”

“Can we just throw them into a sun and be done with it?”

“Do you want to blow up a star?”

“Maybe I do!”

“Look, either way we shouldn’t keep them in the ship while we travel around with them. Thanos is looking for them, and he knows we’re doing something with them, so the Milano may as well have a target on her hull. I’m not gonna get my dasted ship blown up.”

Gamora drew in a breath. “We could leave them with the Collector.” This drew an outraged chorus of dissent until she yelled for quiet. “Who else do we know who likes to put weird things in boxes?”

“I’d rather risk getting arrested by the Nova Corps, they’ve got a whole planet full of high-stepping fuzz—“

“Yeah, but we’d get arrested.”

“I am Groot.”

“It doesn’t matter that our records were expunged after that, we ain’t real popular there are we?”

“Shut up!” Jane snapped. “Look, I read about the Collector – if anyone knows how to contain these things while we collect the others, it’ll be him. Everything I read says his collection has some of the best security outside the Nova Corps.”

“The Collector freaks me out,” Rocket muttered.

“We don’t have to like him, we just have to make sure he won’t play around with our stuff.”

“Why don’t we just make His Divinity put a spell on them?”

“If it were that simple, do you not think I would have done it?” Loki crossed his arms, feeling a little ridiculous for staring down a raccoon of all creatures. “These are objects of incredible power, and more than that, they are possessed of a sentience all their own. Anything I did would have virtually no effect.”

“You’re talkin’ like they’re almost alive,” Peter said, but there was something other than disbelief in his voice. “They’re just… an orb, a mirror. They’re things.”

“They’re far more than that, and they need to be held somewhere secure.” What he did not could not – say in front of everyone was that his most powerful concealment spells would be worse than useless against the kind of power Thanos could wield. It would be better to paint a target on the lot of
them if he tried.

Peter watched him a moment longer, then nodded. “I’ll set a course back to Knowhere,” he said. “But I won’t like it.”

The ship banked, shifting onto a new vector, and the lights of hyperjump reflected off the ceiling once more. Everyone else dispersed slowly, everyone except Jane. She remained behind, her hand on the table and a worried look on her face.

“Are you okay, Loki?” she asked quietly.

“I’m quite all right.”

“You don’t look all right. You look… I don’t know. Sick?”

“You are the one who spends half her day throwing up, Jane Foster.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens. But you haven’t looked okay since we got out here, and it’s only gotten worse. It’s the Stones, isn’t it?”

“And the distance,” he replied quietly. “The spells binding me to Sif – they are stretched so thin, and so I am I.”

Jane bit her lip, reaching out to rest her hand on his arm. “It won’t be long,” she told him. “Someone out here must know how to reach Yggdrasil again, and if we can get there, we can get home.”

* 

Trotting along beside them, Cosmo seemed to be as miffed as a dog could be as he led them through the bustling avenues of Knowhere’s more civilized levels. *This plan of yours is no good, comrades,* he said, and his mental voice had a distinct air of judgment.

“If you’ve got any other suggestions, I’d sure like to hear them,” Peter replied. “We’ve got to deal with someone, we can’t keep carting these things around.”

*So instead of painting a target on one mobile ship, you paint one on Cosmo’s space station. Good friends.* Cosmo woofed, then sat next to a ramp that sloped up to a very simple-looking doorway. *But if you will not listen to reason, here is where you go.*

“Thanks, buddy. Come on, gang.”

The doorway opened up into a huge space. It was well-lit, but so big that the light became hazy and filtered through thick air. At the top of the inner ramp, a pink-skinned being in a white dress waited for them.

“Welcome to the home of the Collector,” she said, bowing. “The Lady Gamora and her companions are known. What other worthies are here today?”

“I am Loki, King of Asgard and Protector of the Nine Realms,” Loki said. “This is my sister by marriage—”

“Doctor Jane Foster,” Jane said. “Princess, but mostly astrophysicist.”

“Be welcome here. We were not expecting you.”

“We’ve got some pretty urgent business we need to do with your boss,” Peter said. “He around?”
“The Collector’s days are too full caring for his collection; he does not leave it. But he will see you. This way, please.”

If he had been in libraries full of books from every realm, then this place seemed to be a library of all forms of life in the universe, Loki thought. And more importantly, there were some things that he recognized from worlds within Yggdrasil’s reach. “Where does the Collector obtain his specimens?”

“The Collector contracts with many beings in the universe to bring him unique beings or objects,” the attendant replied. “Peter Quill has supplied a few items for us, and we always have our agents out seeking that which is not yet here among our collection – which is, might I add, the largest of any kind in the galaxy.”

“It’s certainly diverse,” Jane said. She leaned over to inspect a strange-looking cocoon in a glass case; a placard at the bottom of the case simply read UNKNOWN ORIGIN. “And a little weird.”

“And now I present to you Taneleer Tivan,” the assistant said with a flourish, bowing low as a man approached them. “The Collector.”

As the Collector approached, Loki straightened; there was something about this man, like the shape he wore was just a way for other people to interact with him. Power tickled his senses, and he straightened and lowered his hood as the group arranged itself in a half-circle.

“Oh, the Guardians.” The Collector had a low, drawling voice, but with an odd cadence that seemed to be too fast in the wrong places and too slow in others, just enough to throw whoever was listening off-balance, which was probably his point. “Continuing your exploits around the universe, yes… and what have you brought here?”

His eyes were on Loki now as he walked up closer, and Loki did not like that expression one bit. It made him feel more like one of the specimens behind glass than a real being.

“I would say Asgardian,” the Collector continued, “But you are not, are you?” Though Loki said nothing, the Collector nodded to himself. “I can tell. The glamor hides the markings well, but I have a trained eye, yes… you must allow me to examine—”

“Absolutely not,” Loki told him coldly.

“We’ve got something else you might be interested in,” Peter said. “A couple somethings, actually. You’re really going to like them.”

The Collector stepped back, gesturing over his shoulder with a white-gloved hand as he made his way over to a worktable. When Peter had placed the Orb and the Mirror on the table, the Collector’s eyes widened almost comically.

“Oh, my friends,” he said slowly, his hands shaking as he reached out for the two objects, caressing their surfaces. Loki tensed up, expecting some reaction; did the Orb seem to pulse with faint violet light? Did the surface of the Mirror ripple slightly? “What you have here are two of the most valuable objects in all existence, remnants of the creation of the universe itself.”

“Valuable?” Rocket said from off to Loki’s left. “How valuable, precisely?”

“You could name any price you wanted, and it would be worth the expense. I must have these for my collection, these objects, for you see…” he placed the Orb in a strange device on the worktable and its two arms spun back and forth, unlocking the two halves to reveal a purple stone glowing with malevolent light; waving his hand over the Mirror, he reached into its center and drew forth a green stone from a surface that had become like liquid, handling it with only the tips of his gloved fingers
and quickly placing it in a polished metal tray. “They are possessed of incredible power. In the
history of the universe only a very few beings could even touch them, much less command them.
You know this, I think?” he said, glancing up at Loki. “The stones resonate for you.”

Jane was looking at him. “The Tesseract,” he said. “I have encountered it before.”

“And used it,” The Collector added. “This kind of power knows its own kind and calls out to it.
With these, you could find the others if you wanted, but bringing them together… oh, that would be
the kind of thing the universe hasn’t seen since its beginning.”

“We need a place to keep these,” Gamora said. “If there are more out there, we can’t keep them on
our ship.”

“That is very wise,” the Collector said. “I would normally charge a fee, this is my collection, not a
storage facility… but for these, these priceless, these beautiful…” he took a moment, composed
himself, and planted his palms on the table. “I cannot ask you to pay. It would be an honor to take
these from you until you have need of them, as long as I may display—”

“Is that really smart?” Jane asked. “I mean, if they’re so desirable, won’t someone who sees them
want to steal them?”

“Nobody has stolen from me in many years, Doctor,” the Collector told her. “I assure you, the
Stones will be perfectly secure here.”

He transferred each Stone into a perfectly clear glass container. They seemed almost like harmless
gemstones when Loki looked back over his shoulder at them, glittering in a padded foam tray as the
Collector carried them into the depths of the compound.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Jane muttered beside him. Pulling his hood back up, Loki eyed her.

“This was your idea.”

“I know. But I just have a bad feeling now.”

“As do I. I rarely say this, Jane Foster, but I hope we are both wrong.”

*  

The last Stone they were sure of was on a planet Renax, a planet of cold steel and perpetual rain.
Hooded and cloaked against the chill, they split up when they landed and followed separate routes to
a building obviously the center of the planet’s civilization. Every avenue led here somehow, the
buildings rose in a perfect circle around a wide courtyard, and even in the gray light the glittering
yellow of the stones set into the pavers was easy to see.

“This is going to be rather harder, I think,” Loki muttered. He and Jane were in a café on the edge of
the courtyard; per their plan, Peter and Gamora were making their way into the building with the
other people that seemed to be coming and going constantly. The others were scattered around the
courtyard, waiting in case there was any trouble.

“I still can’t believe they banned you from going in. You’re the best equipped—“

“As this has been a trip full of firsts, I find it particularly apt to say that I think they had a point. The
more I am around these Stones, the more susceptible I am to them.” Loki watched as Peter and
Gamora disappeared into the building, then turned back to the drink served on this planet that was
something similar but entirely unlike to a coffee from Earth. “That could be quite dangerous.”
“Do you think there’s something to what Gamora told you? About Thanos?”

“If there is, he hardly needs me to do anything to help him in his goals, does he?”

They lapsed into a tense silence, watching, waiting for the sign of something to go wrong or right. Something in the building dampened the lure of the Stone – it was said to take the shape of an hourglass with a shifting yellow-orange sand within it, possessed of the ability to send the user forward into the future or backward into the past. Ordinary spells of this nature – Loki had used them occasionally – only allowed the caster to observe and not interact, but this Stone would allow anyone using it to interact with the future or the past and change it.

Jane saw it first and swore quietly, and that got Loki’s attention. When he saw Peter and Gamora running toward the café, Loki swore too.

“The idiot actually took it,” he snarled as they hastily made their way outside. “We were going to wait. We had a plan, Peter Quill!”

“Plan changed! Take this!” He shoved something wrapped in his cloak into Loki’s hands. “Get out of here, we’ll meet back at the ship!”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed—“

“Plans! Change! Run!” Peter grabbed one of his guns and drew it, firing off blasts of what looked like lightning at the approaching soldiers. One of them saw Loki holding the cloak and shouted something in the planet’s language, and a group broke off and made to go around Peter and Gamora, who had drawn her blade and was holding her own against a group of three. Loki waved his hand and the rain intensified, becoming a translucent sheet that sprayed water in all directions when it hit the pavement and pounded harder than a waterfall.

“Go! The ship!” he yelled to Jane, and they took off.

“The others—“

“I’ve got a plan!”

* 

Peter saw the wall of water coalesce behind them and said something that made Gamora’s head snap around. He stuck a hand out toward it and drew it back just as quickly, shaking the sting out of it.

“There’s no way we can get through that!” he shouted, pulling out his other gun and firing at the soldiers, now coming at them from all over the courtyard. Off in the distance he could dimly see flashes of light that were probably from Rocket’s gun, and he heard a lot of noise from where Drax had secreted himself. “That asshole Loki! How the hell are we supposed to get back to the ship?”

“We’ll think of something!” Gamora dropped to avoid the bayonet of one soldier, and used her momentum to keep spinning and rise to kick him in the face. “C’mon, Quill, we need to get the others and get out of here!”

* 

The ship’s ramp lowered when Jane punched the control with her fist, and they leaped up on the ramp before it had lowered to the ground and ran inside. He carefully stowed the cloak-wrapped bundle in a cabinet just behind the stairs up to the cockpit and climbed up, dropping into the pilot’s seat.
Jane was just behind him, throwing off her sodden cloak and sitting heavily in the chair beside him, watching him press buttons until the engines fired up. “I thought you said you had seen this enough times to know how to do it,” she said breathlessly.

Loki grabbed the yoke in one hand, sliding his fingers up the console to increase the engines’ power. “I said it couldn’t possibly be that hard.”

“Loki—”

“I’m sure it will be fine.”

He put his other hand on the yoke and pulled back and the Milano leaped up into the air. Jane yelped and grabbed for her safety straps, and down below things crashed to the floor. “Loki!”

“It’s really quite easy,” he said, putting on his cockiest grin. “If an imbecile like Quill can do it—“

“Building!”

He pulled back hard on one control and the Milano banked sharply, the glass windows of the building rattling and shattering behind them as they passed close enough to see startled faces inside. “See?” he said. “Simple.”

“You are a terrible pilot,” Jane hissed. “And I think this screen is telling us we have someone chasing us.”

Loki glanced up at the new display that had popped up, showing one green dot careening across the city and four red dots growing closer. “I would say you’re right,” he said. “We need—that control there, Jane, that is the weaponry—“

Jane gripped the joystick and gave it a wiggle, and the display shifted. The overview map was up in one corner, and the screen was taken up by a targeting display. “I can do this,” she breathed, and shifted the joystick around until the red crosshairs blinked green. The ship shivered slightly and there was the sound of an explosion, and one of the red dots winked off the screen.

Ahead of them was a cluster of buildings; they were getting close to where the Stone’s sanctuary was, and the buildings grew taller and more intricately linked with sky-bridges and archways. Loki set his jaw and sent them on a crazy, spiraling course, weaving through the bridges and between buildings. One of the dots blinked off, then another as another pursuer got into a losing argument with a skyscraper, until there was only one left following them. “On your own time, Jane,” he said through clenched teeth.

“The buildings,” Jane said hesitantly. “There are people—“

“We will die!”

“I don’t want any of them to die!”

“Stars above, Jane—ah, there they are!” Loki banked hard again, nearly turning the Milano on her wingtip to fit between two buildings, and swooped down to hover above where the Guardians had reunited and retreated away from the courtyard. “The ramp, the ramp—here—“ He jammed a fist down on the ramp control and it extended down and out. A feed from a camera showed Groot lifting each one up onto the ramp, and then the ship dipped as Groot climbed up too.

“We’re in!” Gamora shouted from below. “Take us out of here!”
Jane reached over and hit the ramp controls and Loki slammed the controls forward hard, sending them rocketing upward into space, and he only felt a little bit of glee when he heard muffled shouting and bangs from below. Peter stuck his head into the cockpit.

“Don’t hurt my flarking ship, Loki!” he yelled. “What are you doing?”

They shot out of the planet’s atmosphere, ignoring the klaxons from the comm unit and the shouted instructions to come about and land and return what they had taken, and it only took a moment before Loki hit the correct sequence of buttons to send them into hyperjump away from Renax.

“This is why I hate heroics,” he told Jane. She glared at him. “Nobody is ever properly grateful”

She tried to keep up her glare, but her lips twitched until she gave in and smiled. “You were pretty good, I guess,” she said airily, undoing her restraints.

“I was fabulous,” Loki corrected, standing and peering down into the room below them. “Is it safe?”

He knew, of course; he could feel it humming in his head, making his teeth vibrate and set on edge, calling out to him to unlatch it from its stationary position and let its sands shift. He thought about Sif, about her sitting on a couch in their bedchamber with a hand on her stomach, until the urge passed.

“We’ve put it away,” Gamora said. “Where’d you send us?”

“Away.” Loki climbed down and kept an eye on Jane as she made her way down the ladder from the cockpit after him. “We will drop out of hyperjump in an hour. We can readjust from there.”

“Probably smart, those people had space travel. We don’t want to be tracked.” Peter kicked a bulkhead – Loki saw a corner of the cloak sticking out – and sat on the bench above it. “So. Three down – you said you have the Tesseract on Asgard, so that’s four – and the Aether and Scepter are still out?”

“I have searched Asgard’s libraries and records dating back to the formation of the realm and I can find no clues as to where the Aether may be,” Loki said.

“And the Scepter was lost with its last holder centuries ago,” Jane finished. “According to everything I’ve been reading, anyway. “She tried to stab the wrong alien. Apparently all that was left where they were fighting was a pile of ash.”

“It wasn’t destroyed,” Loki said slowly. “Someone hid it. So it could be anywhere.”

“And space is big,” Peter said. “Great, so we just fly around in circles until something pings in His Worship’s head. But let’s go rest up. If we’re going to search the universe, we’re going to need it.”

* 

Jane woke up in the middle of the night and immediately kicked her blankets off her. They were thin but far too warm, and her dreams had been disturbing and dark, leaving her skin clammy and sweaty. She lay there with the cool air on her skin, trying to will her heart to slow down; Sif and Thor had given her lessons with knife and sword and Natasha had made her practice with smaller handguns until her arms had ached, but half the time was spent on breathing and control. Without those things, all three of them had told her in some way, she would be good but never be able to be great, and Jane knew herself well enough to know that if she was going to do something she was going to be as good as she could be.

Below her, Loki muttered something in his sleep and she heard him turn over. Peeking over the edge
of her bunk, she watched him until he quieted. Sif would want her to keep an eye on him; they were family, after all. Loki hadn’t been looking very well lately, paler with deep dark circles under his eyes. Watching him twitch and mumble restlessly, she figured that whatever sleep he was getting, it wasn’t restorative.

It was those things they’d left with the Collector. He’d nearly peed himself when they’d brought in the Hourglass, and Jane had watched him carefully until he’d put it away with the others. Whatever he was doing with them, it wasn’t really lessening their effect on Loki. She had to admit that she was starting to feel something that could only be the Stones, a prickling along her skin that made her want to wrap her arms around her stomach, protect herself and her child from the Stones’ influence. It could only be worse for Loki, who had nearly been enthralled by a Stone before, who had bonds stretched tight across countless stars. He said little enough to her – his initial confession apparently straining the trust they had – but she knew part of his malady was that he was so far from Sif, his touchstone. She missed Thor too, but from what he had told her about Sif and Loki, their marriage and Sif’s no-nonsense approach to handling Loki’s flights of fancy (Sif’s words) had stabilized an unsteady mind.

Loki muttered something again and twitched, just as a slight vibration shook the railing of the bunk under her palms. Jane’s brows furrowed; Knowhere was so huge that nothing could shake it, and she’d never even felt a tremor from the mining or any other activities on the station before. Swinging her legs over, Jane slipped down from the bunk and dressed before her flesh could prickle in the cold air.

*Use your senses,* Natasha had told the group of them whenever they’d met for shooting lessons, Darcy and Pepper and Sif and Jane sitting in a circle on the carpeted floor of the indoor range. After they’d put their guns away and cleaned up, she would teach them other things, too. After all, if you had to use a gun, you were probably in a bad situation, and you needed all your wits. *Use them, because they can tell you more about where you are and what you need to do than any training about strategy or infiltration, and they’re usually more trustworthy.*

*Use your senses,* Jane, she told herself. Sight told her nothing but that the room was at its usual dim sleep-cycle lighting, nobody else in the room to wake her. Smell only brought the tang of filtered air and Touch its circulation over her skin – except for through her feet, when the floor under them shook again. Taste – a dry mouth. Sound, the normal—

No, there were none of the normal sounds of the station, no faint echo of hundreds of beings doing business, no faraway music. Her breathing, Loki’s breathing and fretful movements, and—shouting? Screaming?

The deck shook again twice in quick succession, and Jane heard a roar that chilled her to the bone. She spun and grabbed Loki’s shoulder.

“Wake up, come on, wake *up,*” she hissed, shaking him vigorously until he snorted and jerked awake, eyes focusing on her.

“What’s going on—“

“Something’s happening,” she said, moving away to stomp her feet into her boots and pull her jacket on. “Something’s not right.”

The deck shook harder, and this time there was a roar that seemed to come from right outside their door. Jane took three steps and flung it open, just as the head of some giant skeletal creature passed the viewports to the outside of the station. Jane watched in horror as it slithered up the side of Knowhere, spines poking out of its back, until it slid from sight.
“What,” she said, “Was that.”

“Nothing good,” Loki said from behind her, shoving a knife into his boot. His eyes were bright, his fingers crackled with green energy; whatever nightmares he’d been having, he was at least ready to fight. “And I can think of three reasons for strange alien beings to attack Knowhere.”

Jane grabbed her gun and they jogged down the corridor. Most of the denizens of Knowhere had taken to hiding in on inner corridors, and they had to step around bodies and over outstretched legs as they wove through on the way down. They nearly collided with Drax and Gamora, and fell in behind them on the way down. Peter eventually came careening out of a corridor close to the entrance to the Collector’s compound, his helmet on and his guns drawn.

“There’s these… things, he said, his voice tinny and metallic through the helmet’s speakers. “All over. I just finished off a group of them. They were headed toward the Collector’s place.”

“The Stones aren’t safe,” Loki said. “We have to hurry, we can’t let them get stolen.”

But when they emerged into the main cavern of Knowhere, they realized they were too late. The metal walkway that would have led down to the Collector’s front door, a few levels down, was nothing but a twisted hulk laying across some of the hovels that other residents lived in, far below. The domes that had once illuminated the entire area of the space within Knowhere were gone, twisted open and torn apart. Jane felt her stomach drop.

They climbed down slowly – Groot helping them when he reached out from a corridor a level down, his arms stretching out to make a bridge for them – and then down into the wreck of the compound. Cases were smashed apart, empty or holding only a corpse now and not a living specimen. The Collector himself sat atop a twisted girder, staring vacantly off into empty space.

“The Stones,” Gamora asked him in a low voice, after he’d acknowledged them with a slight wave of his hand. “Tivan, where are they? Are they safe?”

*Please say yes, Jane thought at him, as though the force of her will alone could stop what she knew was coming. Please say they didn’t take them, please…*

“Gone,” The Collector replied. His voice cracked. “All of it, gone, my collection—“

“The Stones!” Loki snapped, pushing through to the front. Jane did not trust the way his eyes glittered or his fingers sparked, but whatever happened, the Collector had coming. “The Stones, you fool, where are they?”

The Collector looked at him blearily. “They were taken, boy,” he said. “The Stones are gone.”

*Chittering, the soldiers approached the throne, each one of them clasping an object. Thanos’ smile widened as they each laid the item before him and retreated into the darkness of Sanctuary. The Chitauri were perfect for this task; their minds were a hive, and so were resistant to the charms of the Infinity Stones contained within each one of these things. Orb, Mirror, and Hourglass; the Tesseract still on Asgard but he preferred to leave it there for now, the Aether nearly found, and the Scepter already his. Yes, things were proceeding nicely, and all because he had held off killing when it wasn’t necessary to do so.*

“Knowhere is in ruins, my lord,” The Other said. “The Guardians, the Asgardian, and the mortal still live.”
“Let them for now,” Thanos said. He reached out and plucked the Orb from the stone. It hummed in his palm, the Stone within recognizing power when it felt it. The shell glittered in Sanctuary’s starlight as he turned it in his fingers. “I still need the Asgardian to complete the rest of my task for him.”

“My lord, if I may ask…”

“…why do I not just send him?”

“I do not presume—“

“It is not the right time, I fear. You will see.”

“I await your pleasure, then.”

Thanos turned the Orb again, then worked its halves apart until the Stone inside lay bare before him, casting a purplish light. Before him, the Mirror and Hourglass sparked faintly, yellow and green arcing between and around them. The Stones knew something was happening. The Stones knew they were being reunited, and they were pleased.

Thanos smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Questions, comments, requests for meta always accepted at my tumblr.
I think this must be a record for how fast I've updated this fic. I'm glad, though - my plans for the rest of the story have gelled, and now that I have a distinct map I'm going to follow it hard and fast.

I did threaten that most characters were going to end up feeling like poo after this chapter, but that was a lie. Two characters will be okay. Mostly, sort of. You'll see.

*free fall:* any motion of a body where its weight is the only force acting upon it.

Sif woke curled up on her side. For a long few minutes, she kept her eyes closed, hoping that the dawn light would fade and she would be able to go back to sleep, and when she woke the last month would have been as a dream. But no cool arm snaked over her hip and belly, no long legs wrapped around her own, and with a sigh she sat up and let her handmaidens into the room. They hovered a bit anxiously as she rose to her feet, and for once, Sif wasn’t irritated by it. Her belly had seemed to grow overnight for the last two weeks, and she felt bigger than ever. First on her agenda today was a visit to the Healing Rooms, in fact, so rather than elaborate court clothes or modified warrior’s garb, Sif dressed in a simple linen skirt and had one of her handmaidens braid her hair and pin it round her head. Reaching and bending had been two of the first things to go as soon as she had started to show her pregnancy, sadly.

The next thing had been *stairs*, so she now went to one of the platforms designed to move between levels of the palace and waved her hand over the controls, directing it downward. Windows flashed by on their descent, and Sif watched as the city seemed to grow around her, engulfing her.

Thor was gone again, quelling more rebellions on Vanaheim’s moons. The wave was spreading outward, though; Alfheim was reporting that their own dissenters were more active, and more disturbingly, she had heard reports that the Einherjar legions were having trouble replacing weaponry and armor because stores of steel were running low. The palace always kept a stockpile, but increased fighting meant increased usage, and if they were not being replaced by suppliers, if there was an interruption or diversion in the flow…

Absently Sif rubbed one of the places where bullets had once nearly sent her to Valhalla, bullets tipped with Asgardian steel. Somewhere, someone was taking steel and sending it to Midgard and who knew where else, and it was causing ill effects for her armies.

Eir was there to greet her by the fountain, draped in cool blues and soothing greens. She smiled and curtsied. “Good morning, my queen. You’ve grown quite a bit since the last time we met, yes?”

“It feels as though I have doubled in size, Lady Eir.” The child kicked, and Sif shifted her fingers to that spot. “Or at least, the little one has.”

“Certainly so. Come, let us take a look.”

She led the way into one of the rooms, and this time Sif did accept the help of one of her guards in
clambering up onto the illuminated table. She had been able to heave her own bulk up last time, but now it seemed like far too much to ask of herself. Eir waved a hand, and a glowing projection of her body sprang to life in midair.

“How are you feeling, Lady Sif?” Eir asked. “Has your sickness passed fully?”

“It has, thankfully. Now I only feel… large.” Sif made a face. “Unwieldy.”

“You have been wielding your authority ably enough. Any pains, any unusual bleeding?”

“No, none. Except the pain in my skull from having to keep the court in line.”

“Ruling is a heavy burden to bear alone, and you have another to think of as well. Have you been following my advice regarding your diet?”

“Wine and mead are other things I miss dearly when I am at a feast.”

“Why do you think I rarely join the festivities? All right, let us have a look at you.” One of Eir’s assistants passed her hand over the controls by the door and the lights in the room dimmed. The Forge’s controls appeared as Eir held her hands up, and Sif watched the runes scroll by. Loki had always hovered at Eir’s shoulder, watching the displays and peppering the master healer with questions until both Eir and Sif had asked him to leave as his constant worrying was causing her further stress. Now she wished he could be here.

“Your heart and your body are both healthy, my lady,” Eir said at last. “Now, the child…”

The display shifted and Sif smiled to see the tiny outline of a hand appear to wave at her. “Hello, little one,” she whispered. “I see you.”

“The child’s heart—“ Eir pressed a control and a small circle appeared to one side, showing a bright light beating in its center. “—is quite healthy and strong. The spark of life is bright in your child.”

“As I would expect of a child of myself and my husband.” Loki had fretted that there would be some weakness, some deformity caused by the mating of Jotunn and Asgardian; even after they had agreed upon having a child and especially after she had become pregnant, it had been the cause of many arguments between them. “Its body? Can you tell… anything?”

“From what I can see…” the view of what must be her womb shifted slightly, and now Sif could see the curve of a head, a foot. “…the body is forming normally. No complications, Lady Sif, I know you and the king were concerned. And… would you like to know if you are having a son or daughter?”

Sif bit her lip. Loki should be here. “…yes, I would like to know.”

“Very well. Let us…” The view shifted again, seeming to come in and out of focus, until it stabilized. Eir touched Sif’s arm. “Look here, my lady. You are going to have a son.”

She had never pretended to be the one in the marriage who had any command of words, but even what she did have failed her now. “A son?” Sif croaked.

“A strong, healthy son.” Eir smiled, her hand finding Sif’s and holding it tightly. “I know the king would be pleased.”

“He will be,” Sif whispered. “When he returns, he will be.”
“Go, the group by the temple needs assistance searching for survivors,” Thor told a group of Einherjar, then watched as they trotted off. With no one around needing him for the moment, he sat heavily on the stone stairs going up to the once-grand meeting hall of a town that had been all but wiped off the map.

They had arrived when the attack was already well underway, coming as fast as they could from another moon of Vanaheim. Before that, Thor had led a different group on one of Alfheim’s colony moons in successfully fending off a horde of Marauders, but then they had had a battalion of elven warriors sent by Alfrun to help them. This time it had only been his Einherjar and the locals, and it had been closer than Thor would have liked. The people who had lived here before the rebels took it over had very little left, and already a few had asked if they might accompany him back to the city. We have nothing here anymore, they had said. But the city has much for us and our children. Will you help us?

Greer, one of his officers, rode up on his horse. “My lord,” he called out. “There is something you must see.”

In the burnt remains of a metalworker’s shop, Greer dismounted and led the way through the smoking ruins. Glancing around, Thor saw there were several others poking through the debris, and raised an eyebrow. What was it that warranted so much attention when there were people around to help or arrest?

His officer knelt down in an area that had been swept of as much char as possible. “Remember those steel bars that one rebel leader was carrying on Gruenheimr?” he said, pulling a much-folded piece of memory-paper out of his armor. Waving a hand along the edge made an image appear, a reproduction of the mark they’d found on the steel bars the rebel leader had been carrying. He hadn’t had time to file off the mark to make them untraceable, and Thor was beginning to suspect that it hadn’t been coincidence that this place had been targeted. “Look.”

He reached down with the hilt of a dagger and pulled on an iron ring barely discernable from the floor. Beneath the trapdoor were several stacks of newly-refined steel bars, each bearing the same mark.

“They came from here, then,” Thor said. “Is the metalsmith who owned this shop still alive?”

“She was killed in the fighting. I will find her family, though, if you wish it.”

“Do so. I think they and any apprentices she had may want to talk to us back at the palace.”

Once the town had been secured and arrangements made for its continued occupation, Thor returned to Asgard with the rest of his weary troops and the refugees. Heimdall had thoughtfully brought them out midway along the crystal bridge, and the grandeur of the city was enough to distract them for the length of time it took for the carts and horses to arrive. The refugees would be settled in unused rooms in the palace until other housing could be found for them; injured warriors would be taken to the Healing Rooms, and after seeing everyone moving off in the appropriate directions, Thor let Mjolnir bear him aloft. Sif usually took a walk with his mother around this time, and when he landed he saw that they had both paused by the side of a reflecting pool to wait for him.

“And so you return to us safely,” Frigga said, welcoming him with a warm embrace. “You were gone for quite a long time. Lena was asking after you last night.”

“I am sorry, Mother. Things in the Realms are… unsettled.”
“Sif has been keeping me apprised. We will have to look quite far out toward the edges of the city for places to house these newcomers, but Jornar was a farming community. They will likely be more comfortable away from the bustle of the palace district.” Frigga subtly moved aside as she and Sif began walking again, leaving a space for him between them. Thor took it and let both women slip their arms through his. “Are you hurt, Thor?”

“Nothing a healing stone and a bath cannot fix. I would not take Eir or her attendants away from those who need their services more, not for the same scrapes I once got as a child in this very garden.”

“If I had asked you as a child, you would have run off to Eir yourself,” Frigga replied with a smile. “But I am glad you have returned to us whole. Far too many of our Einherjar are coming back with more grievous wounds.”

“It is worrisome,” Sif added. “Our ranks are not infinite, and we cannot spread ourselves too thin without leaving our home undefended, which I will not do. Without Asgard, there is no hope for the other Realms under our aegis. Warriors are not as easily replaced as swords and shields, and even those are beginning to run low.”

“I found more steel bars today, hidden under a metalworker’s shop. They bore the same mark as the others, so it is likely they were already bought and awaiting delivery.”

Sif ran a hand over her face. “Stars and Branches, has no place been sullied? Have we even found the root of this rebellion? What do they want?”

“The Einherjar I left behind are searching for the metalworker’s family. Perhaps they have more information for us.”

“I can hope. It is… frustrating for me to not be out there myself, at your side, but…” she gestured at her stomach. “I may as well draw a target on my body were I to ride out. If I could even get on my horse.”

“It will not be long now, Sif.”

“I hope not,” but Sif’s face said something else. Thor could hazard a guess as to what it was, and shifted his other hand over to rest on top of hers for a moment, and she gave him a grateful look before tilting her chin up proudly. “If only so that I can finally be taken seriously again. What it is about a woman carrying a child that seems to render her inept in the eyes of the court I have no idea, but I will put a stop to it.”

When they had finished walking the gardens and he had promised to come deliver a full report later on, Thor went and found Lena with her nanny in another one of the many gardens. This one was all above-ground planters and hanging pots, and the nanny was showing Lena different flowers and explaining where they came from and their interesting properties. He hung back on the wide balcony, watching his daughter; in profile she looked like Jane in miniature, her little face serious as she listened, her chubby fingers touching the petals with delicate strokes. He could watch her all day, and just as with his wife he felt that if he spent too long away from her she would grow up and go on to whatever great destiny had been spun into the skein of her life and she would not need him any longer.

She finally noticed him and ran over with a squeal, and Thor lifted her up into his arms with a smile. “Are you going to be one of our gardeners, beloved?” he asked her.

“I jus’ wanted to learn about the flowers, Daddy.” Lena looked at him seriously. “You’re dirty.”
Thor wrinkled his nose. “I am? Well, that simply will not do, will it?”

“No, won’t do.”

“Shall I leave you with Siggy so you can learn more about the flowers while I bathe?”

“Yes, please!”

“Very well.” Thor set her down and watched her amble off into the fronds of another plant, pulling on it so she could look at the undersides of the leaves. “Be good, Lena,” he called after her.

“She is very well behaved, Prince Thor,” the nanny said. “And very intelligent, much like both her parents.”

“I doubt either Jane or I can be called well behaved, Lady Siggy.”

Siggy snorted. “Well, at least you know yourself.”

After he had returned to his suite of rooms (reminders of Jane in every corner, from her books to her notes to her clothing, though at least he had the mine-field of children’s toys to navigate to distract him) and cleaned himself up, Thor went to find Sif, and was told that she was hearing petitioners in one of the small halls. With a sweeping view of the city behind the seat where Sif now listened attentively to one of the nobles presenting his grievance with another, it served to remind any approaching her that she was Asgard’s voice, and her will was final.

She saw him enter and caught his eye, nodding slightly to show she’d speak to him next, and Thor listened as she delivered her verdict. Loki might have learned much about how to be a good king, but Sif had learned how to be a good queen, and many of the ruling elite of the city were just beginning to realize that she was as smart as her husband.

Sif let Gungnir thud against the floor to mark her decision as final, and stood. “I will speak to Prince Thor alone,” she announced. “Leave us for now; my guards will tell you when it is time to reconvene.”

Thor sidled over as the hall cleared out, and the two of them went out onto the balcony. “So how bad is it, Thor?” Sif asked. “What could you not say in front of your mother?”

“Things are becoming ever more unstable. I fear that what you said is true, Sif; if we continue to try to quell every uprising out in the realms, we will leave ourselves defenseless. But at the same time if we simply let the rebels take some villages, we will be seen as weak ourselves.”

“Something is coming, Thor,” Sif whispered. She was looking at him at first, but her eyes slid away, out over the city and into the multicolored space beyond. “I can… feel it. When I was crowned… it is a heart that beats in me beside my own and beside my child’s. Asgard knows… she knows…”

She trailed off, and for the first time Thor looked out into the nebula of Yggdrasil with trepidation. He remembered his father speak of his connection to the realm before, how it had warned him of trouble. He worried for his friend now.

“We will tighten security,” he said at last. “Double the guards on all shifts. It will strain us, but I think some of the recruits that have been in training are able to handle that at least.”

“Yes, you are correct.” Sif blinked and was back with him. “It will keep them from feeling too useless, give them something to do. In the meantime, I will see to palace security myself.”
“And you will take care of yourself, yes?” Thor asked. “I know you hate the question, Sif, but Loki would want me to look after you.”

“Across the universe, and he still manages to aggravate me somehow… yes, Thor, I will look after myself and am quite well. It seems you will be having a nephew.”

“A… what news, Sif!”

She smiled, and for a moment all the tension was gone from her. “Eir says he is strong and healthy, and I have seen and heard his heart. Can you believe it, Thor?”

“I never doubted it. And I do not doubt that Loki will return to see his son born. How will he take the news, do you think?”

“He will be even more insufferable than usual and strut around like a peacock, and I will have to deal with him bragging about it for the next five centuries. Our firstborn, a son… well, I cannot say I am not proud myself.” The smug smile on her face was so much like his brother’s that Thor smiled too. Truly they had adopted much of each other.

“Mother sent word while I was bathing,” he said. “She wants a family dinner tonight.”

“I think that a far more relaxing prospect than dining with the court. In the meantime, say a prayer to the gods above that I do not lose my mind listening to these petitions.”

When everyone else had fallen asleep, Steve took his tablet into his room (the hotel owner had, perhaps in a state of fear for his life from whatever Natasha had told him when they checked in, designated the entire floor free for their use) and logged in to SHIELD’s network remotely. If he had been Tony, he’d probably have hacked in somehow so he couldn’t be detected, but at the moment he didn’t really care. Once he was in and had access, he began searching for anything and everything related to the Winter Soldier. If this boogeyman had Natasha spooked, then Steve wanted to be prepared in case they ran into him again.

What he found wasn’t encouraging. The Winter Soldier was tied to a dozen assassinations over the last fifty years, just like Natasha had said. Steve pulled up the files on each one and read them, occasionally taking down a note on the remnant of a pad of paper that the hotel had beside the phone. Whoever this person was, he was an exceptional sniper; all who had ever encountered him said he was incredibly strong, incredibly focused, and never said a word. Steve thought of the mask and the reflective glasses, and wondered if that wasn’t a purposeful choice on the part of whoever gave this guy his orders. They wanted a silent killer, a myth; how better to construct that than to make actions speak for themselves?

He went back to the file labeled STARK, Howard and Maria. Tony had just been a boy at the time his parents had died, and the accident that had killed them was attributed to the Winter Soldier due to the high profile the Starks had. He spent a long time staring at the pictures; Howard, looking older but no less self-assured, and Maria, who Steve wished he’d been around to meet. Anyone who could whip Howard into shape was surely an interesting lady.

“You should be sleeping.” Steve looked up suddenly to where Natasha leaned in the doorway. At his expression she shrugged and nudged the door with an elbow. “It was open.”

He had actually closed and locked it, but it was Natasha, so Steve just set his tablet down on the bed. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”
“Can’t.” She limped over to the bed, perching on the edge of it to turn the tablet around with two fingers. “Light reading?”

“I want to know more about this Winter Soldier. If he’s around here and working with the same people this Asgardian is, chances are we’re going to encounter him again. I don’t want to get anyone else hurt.”

“We’re superheroes, Rogers, it’s an occupational hazard. But I appreciate the thought.” She flicked her fingers and the file windows disappeared, leaving only the Winter Soldier’s dossier. “You get anything else out of this?”

“Nothing you didn’t already tell me.” Steve moved over on the bed so he wasn’t taking up so much space, and Natasha settled herself more comfortably. “You said you worked with him, though.”

“Twice. Years ago. Hang on.” Natasha dug in the pocket of her sweater and produced a couple white pills which she dry-swallowed. “Clint was nice enough to go get me some of the good stuff. I heal up fast, but it hurts like hell.”

“How you know—“

“—you’re alive.” Natasha gave him a crooked smile, then resettled herself. “The first time I worked with the Winter Soldier, I was thirteen. It shouldn’t be a point of pride to be the top in your class of killers, but that’s who I was then. It was better than starving in a ghetto… not that I knew if my parents were in one or not. I grew up with the program, and I grew up with the Winter Soldier.

“Because I was the best, I was rewarded with being the first to test my skills in the field. The director of the Treuhandanstalt, he had a taste for ballet – something about girls’ bodies, probably, rather than the culture of it. So off I went, and the Winter Soldier went with me. In the middle of my private performance of the La Esmeralda female variation – which I was much too young to be performing, thinking about it – the Winter Soldier came out of the shadows and slit the politician’s throat.”

“You were thirteen?”

“And nearly graduated from the program. I wouldn’t have been out in the field if I hadn’t already killed someone. Fucked up, isn’t it, Rogers?”

“I can’t believe this was allowed to continue, someone must have known about it—“

“SHIELD wasn’t what it is now. Back then, if you wanted something hidden, you could keep it hidden.” Natasha drew in a deep breath. “The second time I worked with him in Haiti, I was fifteen. One target, but we had to kill the bodyguards too, and I liked it. It was clean, it was exhilarating. He never said more than ten words to me over both missions, and two years later, I was gone. When I started working for SHIELD, I told them what I knew the first time one of his kills popped up, and that was it. We’ve tried to track him down before, but...”

“It never works unless he’s out in the world, like he is now.”

“And the fact that he’s involved now means that there’s more at stake than we thought. So, do we stop the Winter Soldier, or do we stop the Asgardian?”

“I think the two might be related. Someone wants us all running scared, Steve. That’s usually not a good thing.”

“And fighting a war on two fronts never works out well, either. Whether it’s us or Asgard, Winter Soldier or rebellions.” Steve turned the tablet back toward him, flicking over to the picture of
Howard Stark, followed database links until the screen showed a picture of Peggy, straight-backed and proper in her military suit. “I think we’ve been divided too long.”

Natasha watched him for a long time, her expression unreadable, until she nodded slightly. “I think you’re right.”

*

When Natasha had hobbled out of the suite, Clint had wanted to go after her for a moment – she really shouldn’t have been moving around, he’d said so and Bruce had said so, and Bruce was the closest to a medical doctor they were going to get here – but he’d stayed still and pretended to sleep, and when no shots had run out and no explosions had happened, he’d relaxed. But Bruce was curled up asleep in the other bed, and Clint had something he wanted to do.

Slipping out the door, he pulled out his old-as-fuck flip-phone and went a little way down the corridor. The wall dipped inward here, creating a private little nook, and Clint put his back to the wall and slid down it as he thumbed a number and pressed the phone to his ear.

The others gave him shit for the old thing, but it worked here without having to mess with any fancy networks or whatever, and he didn’t really want to wake up Tony.

The phone rang twice, and he was just starting to worry when—”Clint?”

“Hey, Darcy.” He did not sigh with relief that she’d even taken his call. “What time is it there? It’s not the middle of the night or anything?”

“No, no, I’m just, uh, making coffee. Just finishing up my day.”

“Okay, uh. Good, that’s good that I didn’t wake you or nothin’,” and damn it, the Iowa always came out when he was nervous. “I uh, I just wanted t’make sure you were okay.”

”It’s late as fuck in Kiev right now,” Darcy told him. ”You didn’t just call to be all Midwestern at me.” She sighed, but it wasn’t exasperated. ”So what’s up?”

Clint took a deep breath. He’d been rehearsing these words in his head all evening, but now that he was actually talking to her and all, they seemed really superficial. But he didn’t have anything better to say, so… “I got this feelin’ Darcy, this feeling that bad shit is going to go down. Like, really bad. It’s bigger’n we thought, it’s dangerous…”

”Are you okay? Do you need me to throw my honorary Asgardian weight around? Because I can totally get like the whole army to come, it’s in my charter, I mean they’re out in the Realms trying to —“

“No, no, nothing like that, I just… I needed to talk to you, I guess it’s dumb—“

”It’s not.”

“Okay, uh, good.” He relaxed the rest of the way. “Look, Darcy, I’m, I’m not really good at this stuff, so uh, I just…” damn it how is this easy for anyone “—I’m sorry, for doing the hot and cold thing. It’s not really cool to do that to you.”

”Clint Barton,” Darcy said after a beat of silence, ”Are you apologizing for letting your self-loathing get in the way of damn good sex?”

“Yeah. I mean, and in the way of other things too.”
"Like a fulfilling relationship with another human being?"

"I get along with—"

"Someone not an Avenger."

"Sif."

"Someone not affiliated with the Avengers in any way."

"Uh…"

"That’s what I thought." There was the sound of shuffling papers. "Clint, I… I really like you, I mean, that’s probably obvious what with the sex and all. I just don’t want to be the Superhero Girlfriend, because I really don’t have time for it when I’ve got the same kind of shit going on that the rest of you do."

“I never wanted to do any of that. Not really, anyway. I know you don’t want to be that kinda girl. Just… can you try to trust me on that a little?"

"…I’ll try. Better deliver, Clint."

"I will."

"Be safe over there."

“I’d tell you the same, but you have guards, and I’ve seen you with a taser.”

"Deadly, that’s me. Bye, Barton."

She hung up, and Clint let the phone drop into his lap as he leaned his head back against the wall.

“Bye, Darcy.”

*

The night was still as Frigga made her way back to her bedchamber for the night. It was warm, at least; there had been a frost a few days ago, but fall still had its grip on the realm, and winter had not yet come to cover the grounds in white and chill them all to the bone. But up high in the palace the air was cooler, and so she pulled her shawl around her shoulders and walked slowly, looking out over the city.

Sif had come to dinner smiling and told Frigga quietly that she bore a son, and though her joy was tempered by sadness and longing for her husband, the old queen could see that her daughter shone with anticipation. She would have to remember to get some of the boys’ old things out and see if Sif wanted them, toys and clothes and blankets and the like. She was certain that she’d kept a blanket she’d woven for Loki as he squirmed and mewedled in her lap the day after Odin had brought him home, and it would do her old woman’s heart good to see her grandson swaddled in the green-and-gold cloth.

Then Lena had arrived in her father’s arms, and told her grandmother all about the plants she’d learned of in her lessons, and Frigga had seen both Jane’s curiosity and Thor’s quiet intelligence in her granddaughter’s eyes and manner, and had praised Lena for her memory and her dedication. Thor had beamed at his daughter, and it was the happiest that Frigga had seen him since he had returned from Midgard with only Lena and his heart full of worry for his lady. Thor worried more,
she thought; he knew his time with Jane was limited, and every day that passed with her away was a day he could not spend with her, telling her that he loved her. Perhaps she could yet be persuaded to join the ranks of the near-immortal, but (and it infuriated her that she had been counseled thus by some advisors of the court) she would not force Jane to anything she did not want to do.

Her handmaidens had banked the fire in her bedchamber and pulled the draperies aside to let in air, but Frigga pulled her shawl closer and went around, closing drapes and building fires. She felt cold in her bones, and with what she was going to do, she would not want to leave without making sure her body was warm and comfortable.

Comfortably ensconced, she placed a stool before her scrying pool and reached in, stirring the waters gently with her fingertips. Tendrils of green magic sparked under the surface and swirled, turning the surface briefly mirrorlike before resolving itself into an image of a man sitting at a table, a hat and cloak hung on a peg on the wall and a raven perched on one of the bedposts. Frigga drew in a breath and plunged her hand into the water, and then she was standing in the room with him.

“Husband,” she called softly.

Odin looked up from his meal and rose, and though his smile was gruff and mostly hidden by his beard, she knew it of old. “Frigga,” he replied softly. “My heart is glad to see you.”

“As I am glad to see you again. You know I must look after the welfare of my family.” She longed to touch him, but knew her fingers would pass right through his outstretched hand, and after a moment he dropped his arms, his eye lowering briefly.

“How fares my son and Sif?” he asked. “Have Loki and the mortal returned?”

“Not yet. Sif and Thor do what they can to search, but Sif has a realm to rule and a child growing ever larger in her belly, and Thor runs hither and yon about the Nine Realms trying to keep the threads from fraying.” Frigga smiled gently. “Sif is going to have a son, can you believe it?”

“That child will be incredibly headstrong, I do believe.” Odin sat and sighed. “Things are not well out in the universe, my lady wife. I have journeyed out to the tips of Yggdrasil’s branches, hoping to hear of our son and our mortal daughter, but have only heard ill tidings of things that I long thought lost, gone…”

“Odin?”

“The Titan, Frigga.”

Now she felt cold all over again. “The Mad Titan? I thought he was gone long ago, imprisoned…”

“We were foolish to hope so. He gathers power to himself, he is calling those who have sworn allegiance to him. He has the demon in his grasp, and some darker thing, and I fear he has almost collected all of the Six to him.”

“The Six… but they were scattered!”

“Not far enough. My ravens tell me he has amassed four, and only has the Aether and the Tesseract left, and if he has the Tesseract then the gauntlet is in his reach too. But the Aether was lost, so there is hope that he will not be able to complete the set.”

“We can hope that your father was right about destroying it.” But Frigga knew, deep down in her heart, that none of the Infinity Stones could be truly destroyed save by powers greater than they, and those powers had long since retreated from the world. “If this is true, then Asgard must stop fighting
these little battles on all the realms, we must prepare for war, the Titan will be coming here.”

“The powers of the Vault will, Stars willing, protect its contents. If not, the Destroyer may cripple him enough to repel him for a time. But see that the realm prepares, Frigga.” Odin looked up at her, and Frigga could not remember the last time that she had seen her husband afraid. “My grandchildren must have a realm to call home, and my children must be safe, and all the citizens we are sworn to protect. If Asgard falls…”

“Yggdrasil falls with it, and Hela’s hall will not be able to hold the dead, and Valhalla will overflow with the valiant lost.”

“Let us hope that it never happens,” Odin said. “Would that I could touch you, Frigga. I miss the feel of your hand in mine.”

“And I miss your strength, Odin.”

He snorted. “You have your own strength, my lady.”

“Well, of course, but I am trying to flatter you.”

She stayed and talked with him for some time longer, more mundane things – Lena’s taking after her parents, the way Sif grew large, the Lady Darcy becoming ever more skilled and impressive with each passing year in her position. And when she finally had to go, she paused, then reached out and touched her husband’s cheek. It broke the spell, of course, but she preferred to leave with her last sight being her pale and fading fingertips on his face.

The stars were bright against the branches of Yggdrasil when she finished, and the room was oppressively hot. Frigga waved her hand and the draperies reopened, the fires banked. She made to go to her bathing room, to wash her face and neck and cool off, but something stopped her. Was that a shadow that had passed by in the sky, something flying fast overhead?

A chill went down her spine, but though she stayed and watched the skies several minutes longer, nothing more became apparent, and Frigga reluctantly turned away. Heimdall would alert them if anything was amiss, surely.

But the chill remained, fluttering in her chest like the wings of a bird, and sleep remained far from her.

*

He was so conditioned to the sound that when his phone rang, the first note startled Fury awake, and it only took him five seconds to check the clock and sit up. “Fury here.”

“Sir, it’s Maria Hill. We have a situation.”

“It’s one-thirty in the morning, I got that far on my own, Hill. Explain.”

“I got a call approximately ten minutes ago from Agent Brand, up in the Peak. SWORD has been monitoring that deep-space disturbance on your orders, and at zero one twelve hours, the disturbance abruptly vanished.”

Fury reached over and nudged Coulson in the shoulder, shaking him awake as he put the call on speaker. “Well… isn’t that good news?”

“It would be sir, except that at zero one fourteen hours, the same signature reappeared much closer
Coulson mouthed, *Did we call the Ambassador?*

“Did she alert Ambassador Lewis?”

”No, sir. She called me and yelled at me to tell you. I’ve still got her on the line, sir, if you want me to patch her in.”

“Probably a good idea. And call the Asgardian embassy while you’re at it, someone needs to be able to get a message to Asgard, though I bet they already know.”

While they waited for Brand to be put through, Coulson reached out and pulled his pants over to the bed from where he’d folded them across the back of a chair. “This is not going to be good,” he murmured. “I’m going to go make some calls. Our team is in Europe right now, and we need our backup in case whatever’s out there has more on their agenda than Asgard.”

He dressed and slipped out, just in time to avoid a long stream of profanity from the speakers. Fury let it carry on for thirty seconds, then snapped, “Agent Brand! That’s *enough!*”

There was a moment of silence, the sound of a drawn breath, then with only half the intensity and anger as before, Brand said, “Director, I think there’s something going on in space.”

* Heimdall searched the stars.

He had not lied to his queen when she had ridden out on her horse and asked if he could see her husband. Sif was his sister before she had ever worn a crown or carried a sword, and as grave as he was about his post, family meant nearly as much to him. He had heard the longing in her voice, seen the way she had tilted her chin and set her jaw to keep herself from falling to pieces in front of the Realm she was sworn to, and so every night he stretched his all-seeing gaze to its limits, hoping for any glimpse of his king or of Jane, for he was certain that they would stand by each other.

All he saw, however, were the ripples of their actions. They were out somewhere beyond his sight, beyond the farthest buds on the ends of Yggdrasil’s branches, but whatever they were doing was far-reaching.

Something brought his focus back in closer, to the borders of Asgard itself. It was gone before he could see it, but Heimdall was patient, and scanned the skies and the stars until he found something unusual.

*The stars are blotted out,* he thought, and with his gift, looked more closely.

What he saw made him turn, leaping up the steps onto the Observatory’s pedestal and pushing his sword down into its slot, turning it to activate the ancient security systems of the Realm. Ancient, but not less effective.

In the city, klaxons began to blare.

* Sif knew something was wrong from the moment she woke. The chilly warning feeling was back, making her stomach roil and her heart race. She threw her furs off, walking quickly across the cold floor to the door and calling for her guards.
“My queen,” one of them said. “My queen, the city is under attack—“

He stepped around her as the room filled with light and heat, and Sif turned to see a ball of orange fire expanding outside her bedchamber.

“It’s not safe, Lady Sif,” her other guard said, raising his shield and covering the both of them with it. “Come with me—“

“Not until I see what is threatening my home,” Sif replied, and before he could protest, slipped under his arm and went back into her bedchamber. The furs had been flung over the floor by the force of the blast, and she had to be careful to keep from tripping on them as she went out onto the balcony.

“My queen!” said a new voice, and she turned to see Edwick standing in the doorway. “What are you doing, get back from there, it’s not safe!”

“I have to see!” Sif yelled back, and what did they think she was going to do, throw herself into battle, she knew better—

Something huge and bony and wholly alien roared as it rose past her into the sky, the roar turning into an ear-piercing shriek that had her shoving her palms against her ears and screwing up her face in pain. The sound shattered her soul, sapped hope from her bones, and then it was gone and she was running, throwing on whatever clothes came to hand and stomping into her boots and taking up her sword and shield. It must have looked comical with her stomach, but Sif didn’t care. Her realm was under attack, and she would stand in defense of it, at least to direct those more able to fight.

Arla and the guardsman’s sister Navia, both of them in trousers with their hair bound up, flanked her as she led the small procession through the halls. She found and collected Lena from Thor’s quarters, and when they reached Fensalir she deposited the girl on the floor and went to check on Frigga. Lady of the Realm or not, Frigga had no small skill with blades, and she held one in her hand now as she calmly directed her handmaidens where she willed.

“See the children and any who cannot fight are safe in the lower levels, dear,” she told one of her handmaidens, and then picked Lena up and settled her on her hip. “And you, Sif, you let the others protect you, you may be a warrior but you are in no state to be in a melee.”

“I know, my lady,” Sif said a bit tartly. “But I will be careful. I promise.”

“Good.”

The floor shook under their feet, and Sif had to steady herself on Arla’s shoulder until it stopped. “I will send a detachment of Einherjar to guard your chambers, my lady,” she said.

“No need. I will be with the staff and the children below, send the Einherjar there to meet me. I will be at the door, of course, and will direct them from there.”

“My lady,” Edwick began, “You must be more careful—“

“At my age, Sir Edwick, I will do as I please. Do be careful, Sif.”

She led her group of handmaidens (all of whom seemed to have produced weaponry from somewhere in their skirts) out past Sif’s guards and down the stairs. Sif touched Navia on the shoulder. “Go with them,” she said quietly. “Mind Lena, in case Lady Frigga needs to fight. The rest of you, follow me.”

The palace shook a few more times, but then went still, and when she next passed an opening to the
outside, she saw the golden shield had been raised around it. Ignoring the quiet protests of her guards and Edwick, she took Arla and went out onto the colonnade, looking through the shield to the city beyond.

More of those large creatures hovered and wheeled over the city, and smaller shapes buzzed around them, pursued by or pursuing Asgard’s gun-ships. And down below, on the parade grounds…

“Stars and Branches,” Sif breathed, her hands shaking where they gripped her sword and shield. “It cannot…”

Edwick appeared at her elbow, his eyes widening slightly when he saw where she was looking. “Is that…?” he whispered. “But I thought—“

“As did I.” Sif swallowed, sheathing her blade, for it would do no help against this foe. “Edwick, Thor left for one of Alfheim’s colony moons; call him back with all haste. Then go down to the Vault and see that it and all things within it are secure.”

“At once, Lady Sif.”

“The rest of you,” she said, “Come with me. I may not lead the charge, but I will break this tide when it reaches the shore.”

Down, down they went, lights blossoming against the shield. Sif knew – she had been taken to the shield generator room when she was young and stood in her stained trousers and loose tunic with Thor on one side and Loki on the other – that though this was powerful magic, it could be overwhelmed, and the foe… she knew, knew that Surtur, the demon thought dead, could do it. She would defend the palace, and she would do it with Gungnir in hand as befit a ruler of the realm of Asgard.

“My lady,” one of her guards asked as they swept through the grand atrium, now full of people hurrying every which way, and climbed the steps leading to the pedestal that Gungnir rested on at the end of each day. “Is this wise?”

“Nobody ever said I was wise,” Sif replied, taking up the spear in her hand. It was hot to the touch, as though it knew what was going on and was just as eager to defend its home as she was. “My husband is the one with the smart mind and the smarter mouth. But I stand here, and I will do my duty as best I can.”

She set about directing the people in the atrium – staff and those who could not or would not be able to fight down into the protected lower levels, Einherjar to where reports coming in said that fighting was heavy, Palace Guards to the cannons or to the waiting gun-ships, and all the while the skies of Asgard filled with more of those foul creatures, and the fighting in the parade grounds got heavier and heavier, until Surtur himself stood before the shield and laughed.

“I see you, Asgardian!” he shouted, and his voice shook the floor and the flames of his body whipped round him in a deadly storm. “I see you with your staff and your guards and all your doubts! I see you alone, hiding behind your magic. It will not save you any longer,” and he touched the shield with a finger, and Sif watched in horror as the gold began to sprout cracks, radiating outward along the lines of power that held the magic together.

“Go!” she shouted, gesturing toward the parade grounds. Einherjar ran past her, obeying the will of their queen even though she could see the fear on their faces. Tightening her grip on Gungnir, Sif closed her eyes and recalled what Loki had told her one night. They had been visiting the northern countries in Europe, and in a place called Gamla Uppsala, even Sif had felt power in her bones.
The spells laid on us do not only bind us together, he had said, his fingers tracing down her spine. He had been drawing on her skin with magic that night, giving her wings or claws or a tail, turning her into a Valkyrie of his own design as she straddled his hips. They bind us to Asgard. Her will is our will, her strength is our strength. We have but to command it. And you, Sif, you have the strongest will of all.

She reached out now, imagining her will extending into Gungnir and through the spear into the floor, and through the floor to the shield generator, beginning to whine under the strain of trying to keep Surtur’s magical assault at bay. She saw her will as tiny silver sparks, infusing the generator with new power, and stubbornly refused to let the shield fail.

Before her, the cracks in the shield began to dim and fill back in.

Sif saw the Einherjar fighting with the strange creatures that had come with Surtur, and she reached out through the grass and the dirt and the stone and reached into their hearts, into the hearts of every man and woman who defended Asgard with their life, and she gave them the strength to continue on. Sword tips came up, grips tightened on shields, arrows shot a little truer, cannons fired with more precision. Seeing all this through unfocused eyes, feeling the pulse of the realm and its people in her heart, Sif smiled. She could not be there beside them, but she could fight with them still, and it was nearly as exhilarating.

“You think yourself clever,” Surtur hissed, flames licking at the shield. “Wielding power that was old when your mother’s mother was a child, but you are nothing compared to the power that awaits this place. I am his harbinger, little Asgardian, and I tell you now, surrender to it or there will be no Valhalla for you… or for your husband.”

Sif faltered, her fingers shaking just the tiniest bit. The cracks in the shield began to widen.

“My husband is stronger than he knows,” she murmured, somehow knowing that her words reached the demon anyway.

“His heart is weak. He cracks even now, like your paltry defenses, the chasms widening. He will be let into your husband’s soul, and then it will be too late for anyone. Give in now, Asgardian. It will be an easier death.”

“I will not,” Sif hissed, her eyes narrowing. “If Loki needs strength, I have it to spare.”

Surtur began to chuckle, and though his presence made the whole realm seem like it was in the grip of summer rather than on the cusp of winter, Sif’s gut twisted, and gooseflesh raised up on her arms.

“You think yourself clever,” he said. “Will you still have it, I wonder, if you knew what had befallen him?”

“My queen!” one of the Einherjar shouted, and suddenly there was an explosion almost directly overhead. One of the flying alien sleds had run straight into the shield, and the Einherjar had moved as one to protect her. There was a wet thud and screaming, and Sif peered between the shields of the Einherjar to see one of the alien creatures, horribly burned and howling in pain but moving purposefully toward her, something clasped in its hand. When she saw what it was, Sif felt her heart stop beating.

The creature fell to its knees, but before it collapsed, she would have sworn upon Vár’s scrolls that it looked her dead in the eye and twisted its features into some kind of grin before it tossed what it carried across the floor to her.

She knew how it would feel in her hand when she picked the dagger up, knew its heft and knew the runes carved into the blade and knew the way it balanced perfectly. She had commissioned it as a
gift for Loki’s name-day two years ago, and knew that he had worn it on his person – on him, not merely stuffed in one of his little extra magical pockets – since the day he had lifted it reverently from its wooden box. Loki would never have parted with it if he had any choice in the matter, not even at the uttermost end of need. He would have died with it in his hand before that…

Sif forced herself to breathe. She would have known if he had died, surely their bond was not too attenuated for that, she would have known…

“He was a fool not to follow me at the beginning,” Surtur whispered in her mind. “He might still be alive if he had. But then he went against the Titan. None can stand against him, Asgardian… not your husband, not your sister, and certainly not you, so—“

His words were cut off by a roar of pain, and Sif’s whole body jerked at the sudden release of mental pressure. Lightning flashed across the sky, and a red streak spun round Surtur’s head, white-hot lightning striking out followed by the crack of thunder. A great shout had gone up from the men fighting on the parade ground as their ranks were swelled by the men Thor had taken to Alfheim, and Thor himself took a moment to shout encouragement as he wheeled around the fire demon, striking him with Mjolnir, calling down the storm to cool flames across the city, causing lightning to rain down among the alien attackers. Sif felt her strength return to her and was able to breathe again, though she clutched Loki’s dagger tightly in her hand. She could not think about it right now, the Realm needed her.

The battle raged on with the Einherjar renewed in strength and morale, and finally it seemed Surtur had enough. One of the great segmented creatures swooped down, screeching in pain at the lightning strikes but staying long enough for Surtur to climb atop it, and just as swiftly as they had come down upon the realm they were gone, leaving behind only fire and destruction.

Thor held Mjolnir to the shield and it let him in, and he flew into the Atrium, scattering Einherjar and guards in his path. “Lena!” he shouted. “Is my daughter safe?”

“She is,” Sif replied. Now that the battle was done, now that she no longer had her will tied to the realm, she could think and see and feel, and it was all nearly too much. “She is down below the palace with your mother. She is safe.”

Thor saw her face then and came over, pushing guards out of the way. “Sif,” he said, taking her shoulders in his hands. “Sif, what is the matter? Your face…”

She held up the dagger wordlessly, and it seemed that just looking at Thor’s face change with recognition, just seeing the way he looked at her with huge blue eyes that said everything she felt, something opened in her. When the tears fell they fell hot and hard, and though she stood, Sif felt as Asgard did; burned, broken, and suddenly very, very afraid.

Chapter End Notes

Note: the two assassinations Natasha is referring to in this chapter are the assassination of East German politician Detlev Karsten Rohwedder and Haitian politician Guy Malary.

As always, find me on tumbler @teslatricity to ask questions/yell at me/talk to me because I love filling the endless void with our words of friendship.
Aaaand we're back! I've got the wind back in my sails, and while work is still probably gonna keep me from updating quickly, hopefully things won't be so spaced out.

It should also be noted that in this chapter, fairly early on, a character has an anxiety attack. It is fictional and a bit sensational but I wanted to warn people. Having anxiety problems myself, I don't want to upset anyone unduly.

_perihelion_; the point in which a sun-orbiting body is nearest to the sun.

There was nothing left in the wreck of the Collector’s hall, but they stayed anyway, sifting through debris and shattered glass to find any clues. To Loki, it seemed a futile gesture; Thanos had the Stones, he was lost here at the far end of space without any way of getting back to Asgard to warn Sif, and as far as he knew, he would die here.

“So,” Peter said when they’d all gathered again. The Collector’s assistants moved around them, pushing the cocoon of UNKNOWN ORIGIN (now leaking a clear, viscous fluid) back into a case, trying to bring some semblance of order back. “What are we going to do now?”

“We should confront Thanos,” Drax replied. “We cannot let him gather all the Stones. If we even took but one—“

“It’s impossible,” Gamora interrupted. She looked pale, her hair and skin streaked with dirt and ash. Fires still burned throughout Knowhere’s cavern, and smoke stung Loki’s eyes. Jane had fashioned a mask out of her jacket and wore it over her nose and mouth, but her eyes were red with irritation. “We were lucky he didn’t pursue us when we picked up Loki and Jane, and that was a stupid risk in the first place. Now that he’s got some of what he’s looking for he’ll be even more dangerous.”

“I am Groot?”

“Ain’t no way I’m going to go in there without backup,” Rocket muttered. “Sorry, Groot, but I don’t have no deathwish.”

“We have to do something.” Jane crossed her arms. “If these Stones call out to one another, he can use the three he got from us to find the rest, and then he’ll be able to find Asgard, and… what’ll happen if he gets all six together?”

“Death,” Loki said. Everyone stared at him, and he shrugged, lacking the energy to push back. “Gathering the Stones together and infusing their energy into the Gauntlet gives whoever wields it unimaginable power. The mortals thought Asgardians to be gods when we visited earth millennia ago; whoever has the Gauntlet would be a god. There are few who have the willpower enough to bend the Gauntlet to their wishes. Even then it can only be used for destruction. Whatever Thanos has planned, it will not end well for anyone.”

He thought again of Sif, unaware and alone at the other end of their bond, and wished he had some way to communicate to her their urgency. But there was no way, and the despair that had set in his
bones gripped more tightly to his heart.

“I’m not just going to stand by and let Thanos destroy everything,” Peter said emphatically. “There’s gotta be a way to stop him, and if it means flying right up to his face and dying to stop him, that’s what I’ll do…”

Peter’s words faded into noise. The Stones and their maddening hum might have been gone but Loki could hear it even so, even when he’d turned and started walking away, ignoring everyone else calling after him. Nothing they said mattered; no plan they came up with would succeed. There was no point, and he would not waste time listening to empty words.

He found a place by one of the windows looking out into space. Flotsam drifted away from Knowhere, and tugs were pulling in the larger pieces for salvage and scrap. The attackers had not been delicate in their drive to get to the Stones, and it was only through whatever systems kept generating atmosphere for the station that it hadn’t completely vented. It wouldn’t have mattered if it had; for the first time in years, he felt as though his skin was too tight to contain him; his breath came too fast and too hard as he climbed up onto a support beam and tried to make it stop.

He had had these attacks most of his life, and it had been maddening. Loki prided himself on his control, and being unable to stop his racing heartbeat or catch a full breath or track his blurred, incoherent thoughts had nearly driven him completely mad more than once. As a child, Frigga had held him and talked him through it, making sure he was in a calm place where he felt safe so he could regain his grip on himself. When he had married Sif, she had told him (in her frank way, which was eminently comforting) that these episodes were not a sign of weakness and that she thought no less of him for it. Indeed, having Sif in his life had gotten him to the point that he rarely had them, or that he could even stop them before they started, knowing as he did that he had her loyalty and her affection.

Clenching his fists, Loki focused on the pain of his nails digging into his palms. When these episodes had come over him before he had envied Thor’s physicality. Punching something would have been a fine release for the tension in his body, curled up like a spring, and now if Knowhere hadn’t already had holes punched through it today he would have added a few himself. But it wouldn’t serve him to throw a tantrum, just as it did not serve him to lose his head this way. Putting his face in his hands, Loki took deep breaths, counting through each one until inhalation and exhalation counts were even.

“Loki?”

He kept his hands over his face. “I’ll be along in a moment, Jane Foster. Please go.”

He heard her walk over closer and sit on the beam beside him. Stubborn to the end, she was. “I’m worried about you.”

“The line forms over there.” He waved a hand somewhere down the corridor. “I only need a moment to recollect myself.”

“You look like you need more than that. You look like hell, Loki.”

“Thank you, Jane, that is exactly what I wanted hear—“

“I’m only trying to look out for you, asshole, so quit snapping for a minute and listen.” She took a breath. “We’re going to go after the Stones.”

Loki raised his head, a disbelieving expression on his face. “Are you all mad? Thanos has the Stones now, and I cannot go against him—“
“Well, luckily you have a few other people with you. Look—either we go after Thanos and get the Infinity Stones back and stop him again when he comes running after them, or we fend him off when he’s got more stones and more power and comes after the Tesseract, or something. Either way we’re going to be fighting him, we just need to make it on our terms.”

She tucked a hand around his elbow and let him sit in silence for a while. When he was ready, Loki drew in a breath, reaching over to cover her hand with one of his.

“You are not talking like an astrophysicist right now, Jane Foster,” he told her. She snorted.

“I thought my life was complicated when I was trying to get grants and publish papers in a journal that didn’t take my work seriously. Here I am now, though, sitting beside my alien brother-in-law, talking about taking on a purple menace with incredible destructive power. If there’s a degree for dealing with all that, I’d like to know about it. Right now, though, well... it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve made things up as I went along.”

His heart rate was under control again. Loki tilted his chin up, straightened his shoulders. He was a king, and he would act it. “I occasionally regret that my brother met you first, Jane.”

“Oh, occasionally, he says.” Jane kicked her legs back and forth in the air, then let them swing until they were still. “I’m flattered, though.”

“As you should be.”

“Good to know your ego hasn’t suffered too much.” Jane took her hand back and hopped off the beam, brushing herself off. “Now c’mon. We’ve got planning to do, and we’re going to need you.”

The Guardians were already waiting when Loki and Jane got there. By their expressions, there had already been more heated debated, but everyone looked resolved (or at least resigned) and after Peter glanced around the group he began.

“We’re all mostly agreed that Thanos havin’ so many Infinity Stones is a bad idea,” he said. “So we decided—“

“You decided—“

“We decided, Rocket, that we should go get ’em back.”

“This plan is even worse than Thanos having the Stones in the first place,” Rocket muttered. “Flarkin’ crazy Terrans...”

“And we want to get you back to Asgard as soon as possible,” Gamora added. “The gauntlet is there and so is the Tesseract, and it is likely you have the key to the Reality Stone somewhere in your planet’s knowledge. Thanos will go there next.”

“How, I ask you?” Loki crossed his arms. “All our work has brought us no closer to knowing where Asgard is from here.”

“I’ve, uh, been working on something,” Jane said after a moment. “A program that’ll run star chart permutations. It’s possible we’re seeing the right stars, just from the wrong angles.”

“How long will it take?”

“No idea, but I’ll start it running on one of your handheld tablet things. Maybe we won’t have to go confront Thanos at all.”
“I would do so,” Drax rumbled. “He has taken much from me and all of us. It would be foolish to let him have this.”

“Even with only three Stones he's too powerful.” Gamora tapped her fingers on the scratched surface of the table. “We have to get them from him and scatter them across the universe, split them up for safekeeping—“

“That worked amazingly well.”

“--and put an end to Thanos.” Drax eyed Rocket until he sat back down, muttering still. “His crimes are too numerous. I would like to slit his throat myself.”

“Maybe you will.” Peter put his hands on the table. “But our goal's gonna be to get the Stones away from him.”

“All of them, if possible,” Loki added. “They resonate with one another. If he has even one he will be able to find the others.”

“Then we should probably get moving. The longer we wait—“

“—the more danger the universe is in, blah, blah, blah.” Rocket hopped down from his seat and joined them as they left the room, headed for their ship. “We don't get paid for bein' big damn heroes.”

“I am Groot.”

“Don't start that with me, Groot, nothin' good ever came of actin' altruistically.”

“I am Groot.”

“Except that.”

“This is a terrible plan,” Gamora grumbled. Beside her, Loki pressed his lips together on a smirk.

“Yes, but it could be worse.”

*

Cosmo thinks this is a terrible plan.

“Cosmo just needs to program the hyperjump for us.”

Cosmo does not need to do anything for Peter Quill when it is stupid and will get Quill and friends killed.

“This has not gotten less weird,” Jane muttered in the back of the group. She was holding her tablet, numbers and stars scrolling across it as it ran its program. It was one of the only things she'd grabbed besides her blaster when they’d gone back to their room up in Knowhere's eye orbit. When they’d gone to the Milano, though, they’d found Cosmo sitting at the foot of the ramp and spoiling for a fight.

Jane Foster will thank me for it when she is still alive! Cosmo growled, his whole body tense. Thanos may make no move at all, and then you will all have wasted your lives for nothing.

“Or he will continue to gather Stones and become the power in the universe,” Loki snapped, pushing to the front. “I would rather not see what I have torn to shreds. I have spent a very long time, dog,
shaping matters to my liking. I do not like wasting time.”

I will arrange for a haven--

“There won’t be a haven if Thanos gets what he wants!” Gamora shouted. “That’s what we’re trying to stop, Cosmo, please!”

The dog looked each one of them in the face for a long few moments before huffing and trotting off to one side. I will help you, he said, and his mental voice was extremely disgruntled, But I will not like it at all.

“Thank you!” Peter yelled after him.

“That canine can be very troublesome,” Drax muttered as they all charged onto the ship. “But I do not think his concern was ill-placed.”

“We don’t really have any other choice, Drax,” Peter replied as he threw himself into the pilot’s seat, flicking switches and bringing the ship to life. “This is our home. I’m not going to let Thanos tear it apart for fun.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Jane murmured, leaning over as she and Loki buckled in. “If we succeed, you’ll be around one of those things again.”

“I have survived being in the presence of three Stones.”

“Barely.”

“I will do what I must.” Loki buckled his restraints, forcing his hands to keep from shaking. “Too much is at stake.”

*

He watched as the ship took off, navigating the debris field around Knowhere before disappearing into hyperjump. Crouched in shadow, he sat for a long moment, lost in thought. If only there had been some other way, some option...

But there wasn't one, and he knew what he had to do. He couldn't stay out of it anymore.

Leaping off, he flew out into space.

*

“They are coming, my lord.”

He rose from his throne, his eyes narrowed. At the edge of Sanctuary's space, a flash of light illuminated the shattered remains of the world that he had destroyed to make his place here. The brilliance was immediately swallowed again by the dim light that pervaded this area of space, but he could see a faint speck of light bank away, fading into the starfield.

“Is everything ready?”

“Yes. Shall I have them intercepted?”

“No,” Thanos said immediately, turning to face the Other. “I want them to be able to reach us unmolested. Send a message to our friend in Asgard – he should make his own preparations. It won’t be long now.”
“As you wish, my lord.”

The Other left, and Thanos let himself smile wider and wider.

“Come here, Asgardian,” he said. “Come and meet your destiny.”

* *

“This doesn't make any sense,” Jane said, craning her neck to watch as the huge, plated creature slid past above them. It gnashed its spiked teeth, but made no move to intercept them or pursue. “Why are they just watching us?”

“Thanos enjoys playing mind games with others.” Gamora's voice was tight, and though his head throbbed – there were more than three Infinity Stones nearby, he could tell – he could see that Gamora was affected too, her knuckles white as she gripped the armrests of her seat. “He's doing the same with us.”

“An' us flarknards walked right into it,” Rocket said. “Didn't I say it was a bad idea, Groot?”

“I am Groot.”

“Who cares if you thought it was the only thing we could do?”

“I am Groot.”

“Don't you sass me, you—“

“Can we all shut up for ten seconds?” Peter snapped. “I'm tryna navigate this dasted debris field full of bad guys!”

“The bad guys that aren't attacking.” Gamora watched as one of the huge plated creatures turned away from them at the last minute, the long, spine-like vanes on its sides nearly colliding with the Milano.

“That doesn't make it less difficult!”

“Hell of a lot more freaky,” Jane said, but her attention was on her tablet, and Loki leaned over. The buzzing in his head was maddening, and if he couldn't distract himself he couldn't be effective when they were face-to-face with Thanos.

“Has it returned anything?”

“It thinks it's gotten a couple constellations locked,” Jane replied, showing him. “Cygnus, here, and Cepheus.”

“It thinks.”

“The probability will increase when it's gotten more constellations locked in. But for now it's just guessing.”

Loki sat back, watching as Quill brought them out into the center of Sanctuary. Ahead was only the small cluster of asteroids curiously stationary in space, and the pressure in his skull increased the closer they got.

“I'm gonna put us down on that big one,” Quill said. “Think there's enough space?”
“I can’t tell if that’s a pun or a legitimate question...”

As they left the ship, Loki thought about telling Jane to stay behind, watch her tablet to see if her program turned up anything, but one look at her face was enough to put paid to that idea. Her jaw was set, her eyes narrowed and stride determined, probably remembering their first encounter. It would probably be worse for his health if he even suggested staying with the ship.

For him, the ascent up the glowing stairs was like revisiting a nightmare. He knew how it ended, he could feel his heart beginning to race, but he had to keep going. It wasn’t until Jane grabbed his hand in one of hers that he realized he’d clenched his hands into fists.

“Thank you,” he murmured, forcing his fingers to relax. Jane let her hand slip away.

“We need you to be with us, Loki,” she whispered. In the still atmosphere it sounded like a shout. “Are you sure you're up to this?”

“I fear it is too late to turn back now.”

“So it is,” a voice said as they reached the large, flat area. Gamora had stiffened, her hand tight around the hilt of her weapon, and Loki felt a chill run through him. From behind the throne he emerged, huge and broad and smiling like he had all the answers. Thanos clasped his hands behind his back as he stood before them, but his eyes were on Loki.

“This probably ain't gonna work, but... hand over the Infinity Stones, Thanos, or we'll take 'em.”

“The Infinity Stones? These?” Thanos swept his hand across the back of his throne and the Stones appeared, sparkling bright against the darkness of space. Loki forced his expression to remain neutral despite that the hum in his skull had spiked up painfully high. “No, I think these shall remain with me.”

“We will take them by force if we must!”

“Ah, Gamora. My favorite daughter.” Thanos turned to her, grinning. “I was so... disappointed when you left, after I cared for you, provided everything you could have needed...”

“You killed my parents in front of me and eradicated my entire species,” she replied coldly. “You experimented on me.”

“And have you not enjoyed the benefits of those procedures, the place that their effects have given you in this universe?” Thanos reached out a hand to her, palm up. “A deal, then: if you return to my side, I will let your companions here leave Sanctuary unharmed.”

Her eyes narrowed, and though it was clear she didn't believe him, she asked, “With the Stones?”

“Oh, no, never. I need them. And him.” Thanos pointed at Loki. “The rest of you are irrelevant—even you if you refuse my offer, Gamora.”

“I was really hoping we could settle this with words like big people,” Peter sighed. Then he brought up one of his guns and started firing, and that was the cue for Rocket and Jane to let loose with their own weapons. Groot roared and lunged forward, a fist growing twigs around itself until it was huge, Drax leaping forward with his blades held out before him. Only Gamora and Loki stood back, and so they watched Thanos wave a hand almost lazily, sending the gun blasts careening off into space and swatting Groot and Drax away as though they were flies.

“I have no words for you, Peter Quill, son of Earth,” Thanos said coldly. “My patience runs out with
the lot of you.”

Chitauri materialized out of the shadows around them, and as the others were pulled into fighting Thanos walked forward slowly, his eyes back on Loki. Even as he threw one of his spells – Jane had to be protected, Jane was his sister in more than name only, Jane was loved of Thor as well – Loki saw his hands begin to shake and turned.

“You could be truly great, you know,” Thanos told him. “They've leashed and muzzled you, your wife and your mother and your brother.”

“Do not dare speak ill of my family,” he said, but the green sparks around his fingers began to die slowly, flickering out against a darkness that had found its way into him like a parasite. “I am—”

“A shadow of what you could be. A pale imitation.” Thanos gestured with a hand, and though Loki had tried to keep Jane in his view he could not focus on anything but what emerged next from the shadows. Holding a scepter, clad in black and gold and green, Loki watched himself come to stand beside and slightly behind Thanos. But it wasn't really him, this other Loki; this one was leaner, his mouth more cruel and his eyes dully reflecting the light of the gem glowing in the scepter. But it wasn't just a gem—the other Stones glowed brighter at its advance, and the hum in Loki's head grew higher-pitched.

“You show me an illusion to try and sway me?” Loki said, gesturing to himself. “I think—“

“I am not an illusion,” the other Loki said, and even his voice carried ice in it. “I am what you could have been if you'd been brave enough to grasp it.”

“If you had but reached out and grasped it, you would have it,” the other Loki said, and raised the scepter. Images flashed through Loki's mind so fast that he winced and pressed the heel of a hand to his eyes, the laughter of the other Loki mingling with the sounds of fighting around them.

“The Infinity Stones show us many things.” Thanos waved a hand and the other Loki handed the scepter over to him and turned, disappearing in a swirl of green light. “Things that could have been are perhaps the cruelest of all. But your chance is not yet beyond you, Asgardian. You can still have everything you want.”

“I have everything I want,” Loki whispered, but that little dark worm had risen up again. Did he really have it? His kingship had the caveat of Thor's eventual return; Sif had not married him of her own free will. Could he trust anything she said, what she did? Would she, too, leave him?

“Do you? Are you certain?”

“I...”

“You aren't, because you know you were meant for more than just keeping the seat warm for your brother. You need your teeth back, little Asgardian, you need to be respected. I can give it to you – I can help you be what you were meant to be, keep what you have from being taken from you.”

She will not leave you, a voice in him said, an echo from a far distant plucking on their bond. Somewhere, Sif was thinking of him, and Loki closed his eyes and clung to that thread.

*

The suns had set on Asgard, the nebulous Branches bathing the city in a dim glow. Sif had tried to sleep but found she could not, her mind replaying again and again the glitter of the knife at her feet, the numb feeling that had taken her heart captive when she had picked it up. Memories of Loki
picking it out of his collection, balancing its point on his finger as he told her (with that damned cocky grin of his) that if she could not be there with her shield to guard him, he would at least have this gift of hers to keep him safe. It had given her comfort to know... but now...

Now she rose, going to the balcony to look over the city. The baby kicked inside her, and Sif rubbed the stop, smiling a little despite herself when she felt pressure in return.

“It must be quite cramped and uncomfortable in there for you, little one,” she said quietly, her eyes on the lights of Asgard, following the crystal glow of the bridge out to Heimdall's Observatory out to the glowing Branches of Yggdrasil in the sky. “It will not be long now. Soon, you'll be out here, too.”

She rested a hand on her stomach, closing her eyes again to reach out to the place in her mind and heart that had been Loki's since the day they married, the place that magic had bound them together and love had strengthened. That she did not feel emptiness there gave her hope, but something had plucked the taut string, and Sif bit her lip.

“Something is wrong,” she whispered. “Something is very wrong, little love.”

Picking a cloak up off one of the couches, she pulled it over her shoulders as she left their bedchamber. Frigga would know what to do.

*  

“It could truly be all yours, you know,” Thanos said, and a blue glow filled his mind. “Respect, that thing you want most of all. People would follow you because they wanted to, not because you are the king of last resort. All you have to do is reach out your hand and take it.”

In his ind Loki saw himself reaching out, taking the scepter, filling with its power. King of Asgard, yes, and Midgard, and all it would take were two little gifts and an agreement, and really, who in the Nine Realms could handle what Thanos asked for?

Someone was calling his name from far away.

He reached out and took the scepter and he was Loki, beloved and favored son of Odin—

*Is that still what I need?*

--son and student of Frigga, King of Asgard, the man who could give his wife all she wanted in war or in peace, the man without doubts. Sif with her hand in his, smiling, and he smiled too because he knew he had her love, her... her loyalty...

--you already had those--

“I can take away all your doubts,” someone whispered, and Loki reached out his hand, fingers searching for cold metal and colder power and—

—a rush of air, an angry snarl. Loki shuddered from head to toe as Thanos’ spell broke, and jumped when he felt a hand come down on his arm. The white-gloved hand belonged to a man with vibrant red hair, and when Loki met his eyes there was not only a softness to them but an infinite depth. Calmness washed over him, a feeling of contentment and peace.

“That's better, isn't it?” the man said. “Better than mucking about with that scepter. It's not what it seems, of course, but you knew that.”
“You,” Thanos hissed. The man smiled again at Loki and nudged him back, and he felt Jane take his hand. The Chitauri had been pushed back for now or else had stopped coming, and the Guardians had gathered around them, watching this newcomer warily. “You! Why are you here? How?”

“Nice to see you too, brother. It's been so long, but some things never change, I guess.”

“Brother?” Gamora muttered behind him. Loki narrowed his eyes; like the Collector, there was the sense of immense power rolling off this newcomer, the body barely containing it.

“You do not know what you've interrupted—“

“It seems to me you were trying to manipulate someone else into doing your dirty work. That's rather rude of you, Thanos.”

“I thought that you had decided not to get involved, Eros,” Thanos spat. “But now that you have, it seems you want to die with the rest of this scum.”

“Oh, so we're scum now?” Jane said. “Even Loki?”

“Jane—” Loki hissed, gathering himself together enough to get that much out. But it was too late, and Thanos whirled toward her, raising the scepter. Loki scrambled across the rock, throwing one hand up to create a shield and knocking Jane out of the way with his shoulder. The blast of energy from the scepter cut right through his spell, though, and he barely had time to get up another closer, stronger shield before it struck him. The wind knocked out of him, Loki flew back and slid across the ground.

“That,” Eros said, “Was very rude. Now, Thanos, you will let these people leave.”

“And go where?” Thanos' face split in a grin. “Knowhere, their little rat's nest? Another galaxy entirely, another universe? Nowhere will be safe from what I will do!”

“All because you desire death?”

“What greater desire is there in me? Love is a powerful thing, Eros, you ought to know.” Thanos saw Loki getting to his feet and his grin widened, a rictus of amusement. “It's a pity, Asgardian. You had the way back inside your mind the whole time, and you were too stupid to realize it. Now you will die without ever seeing anything you care about ever again.”

He raised the scepter again but several things happened at once before he could level it at Loki. The Guardians closed ranks around them, pushing back toward the stairs and the ship. Eros surged forward, swatting the end of the scepter away with a hand. And the Chitauri all fired, but the Guardians were no longer where they had been, so the shots either fizzled out in space or struck other Chitauri, causing chaos to erupt behind them.

“Go!” Peter was yelling, bringing up the rear with Gamora. “Go, go--no, Drax, we're getting out of here, we can slit his throat later, go!”

“He cannot be allowed to live!”

“I know that—“

“We didn't even get one Stone—“

“We won't be able to get any if we're dead, you psycho!” Rocket shouted.
Loki, though, had gotten an idea into his mind. Something Thanos had said—*the way back*—and when they clambered back up into the *Milano* and Peter brought the engines back to life, Loki pushed his way forward.

“I have an idea,” he said. “I know how to get us to Asgard.”

Peter gave him an incredulous look. “Are you kidding me, we've been running around the galaxy for weeks and—”

“This is different! I know this will work!”

Gamora twisted in her seat. “Jane! Has your program turned up anything?”

Jane leaned far out of her seat to grab her tablet, bracing it against Drax’s seat as the ship banked hard. “It's only got a few constellations locked,” she said. “If Loki's got an idea, we should try it!”

“We're going to pick up a hitchhiker first. Loki, whatever you're going to do, get ready to do it – and someone go stand by the upper hatch.”

“Hatch,” Drax grunted, moving aft out of the cockpit. Loki came forward, clutching onto Drax's vacated chair as they banked hard and a streak of red and gold passed their viewer.

“We're picking up the brother?” he asked, throwing himself into Drax's seat and bringing up navigational control.

“Thanos' little bro might be a good person to have around. Whatever you're gonna do, do it fast—we've got incoming!”

“I've got weapons,” Gamora said, and Loki heard the *Milano*'s guns start up. “Chitauri in pursuit. We're handling them right now but there are a lot of them out there, Quill, we'd better get clear of this debris field.”

“Drax, you got our guest?”

There was a thud and a yell. “*I have him, Quill! Close the hatch!*”

“Closing! King Sparklefingers, if you're gonna do something—“

“Working,” Loki muttered, his eyes half closed. He had the idea in his mind, the way home... but how to translate it to action?

Drax and Eros arrived in the cockpit and strapped in, and Peter jammed the thrusters full open, getting dangerously close to chunks of rock and asteroids as they made for the edge of the debris field. Loki tuned it out, though, eyes half-closed and fingers resting on the keys of the navigation controls. Inside him the whole time...

“Loki,” Jane said warningly. “Loki, we're five seconds from the edge of the debris field—“

He closed his eyes, reaching again for the thin string connecting him to the other half of his heart, and as he did, his fingers moved across the keys, putting in coordinates and bypassing every warning that the computer came up with.

“Where is he sending us?”

“This isn't on any of our charts—“
“I trust this,” Jane said over everyone's heads. “I trust him.”

Loki entered the coordinates and let go of the connection, drawing a breath. “On your own time, Peter Quill,” he said, leaning back against the headrest.

*

Frigga was still awake, thankfully, and called for something to drink before sitting down and taking her hands. “Sif? Sif, whatever is the matter?”

Sif licked her lips, considering her words carefully. “You are bound to Odin in the same way Loki is bound to me, yes?”

“Yes... child, has something happened to Loki? Is the bond--”

“It is still there. Otherwise I would be in a far worse state, but Frigga, something is happening, I can feel it, something is wrong.” Sif pulled away and got up, pacing. “I can feel it in here—“ she pressed a hand to her heart “--but I do not know what it is, and I do not know what to do about it, but...”

She trailed off, staring out through the columns and across the gardens and out to the edge of the realm. Frigga leaned over, her brow furrowed. Sif's eyes had become unfocused, her hands cradling her stomach. “What? What is the matter, dear?”

Distantly, Sif replied, “Someone is coming. He... it's Loki. Loki is coming home!”

*

“We gonna make hyperjump or what, Quill?”

“Trying to get clear!”

The ship shook as Peter pushed it hard, dodging attacks and asteroids. Just ahead was clear space, but with the thickest collection of Chitauri between them and freedom...

“We're going to have to jump inside the debris field,” Peter said, bringing up the hyperjump controls.

“Peter,” Gamora began warningly, but he shook his head.

“There's nothing else we can do, we're not going to make it out of here through all those Chitauri and we have to get back to Asgard and make sure that it's ready to defend itself from Thanos since we didn't get any of the Stones he has.” He looked over, grinning at her. “It's not the worst decision I've ever made, Gamora.”

She put her face in her hand, and Peter's hand hovered over the jump controls. “Everyone hold onto somethin',” he said, and punched it.

Light streaked past the viewport, and Loki watched it, for it mirrored the growing light in his chest.

*

Sif ran as fast as she could through the palace. That place that had felt too thin, too stretched out for months was filling again, light and warmth and feeling when she hadn't even realized she'd been cold. Anticipation – hers or Loki's or both – flooded through her.

Behind her she could hear Frigga calling to the guards they passed, telling them to find Thor, the shouts and questions of those who were woken by the noise, but she paid them no mind. She had to
be somewhere.

* 

The *Milano* shook dangerously, warning alarms going off all over the console.

“We're going to break apart!” Drax yelled. Loki just gripped the armrests of his seat a bit more tightly. *Nothing is wrong,* he thought to himself.

“Proximity alarm's going off,” Peter said. “We've got to drop out of our jump or we'll hit something!”


“I'm not going to put this ship at risk!”

“*Wait!*”

“You crazy flarknard, you'll—“

“*Now!*”

Peter slammed the jump controls back and the *Milano* shook one last time and dropped out of hyperjump, and the glow of Yggdrasil's branches filled the cockpit. But it was nothing compared to the sight of Asgard in front of them, brilliant even at nighttime.

“You did it,” Jane breathed. Her face was just as luminous as his home was.

Peter brought them in on a long arc, circling the palace. “Can I land there in front of it?” he asked Loki, pointing to the broad parade grounds. “You don't look like you have any kind of landing pads.”

“Yes,” Loki said absently. Sif was in the palace—no, there were people gathering out on the steps leading down to the parade ground, she was *there.* “Yes, right in front will be fine.”

Peter set the *Milano* down, peering at the Einherjar and other people who had come to see what was going on. “Welcoming committee,” he said. “You're up, Your Worship—hey, where'd he go?”

Loki was moving, down the ladder and through the ship and down the ramp before it even had a chance to lower all the way. There were Einherjar everywhere, soldiers who raised their weapons when they saw who it was.

There was the boom of thunder up above and Thor landed in front of him, cape billowing out as he strode forward. They stopped, a few feet apart.

“Loki?” Thor rumbled, almost as though he could not believe it.

“It's me, Thor.” Loki held out a hand, and after a moment staring at it, Thor clasped his forearm. “Jane's coming—“

“Thor!”

“She is here,” Thor said. He glanced behind him, where a few more people were coming out of the palace, including...

“Go to her, brother,” Thor murmured. “I must see my Jane.”
Loki let go of his forearm, letting Thor go past him, because there was only one person he could see now. Beside his mother, above all the other people clustered now on the stairs, she was there, and he was moving and she was pushing people aside and running across the grass, the Branches themselves glittering and caught in her hair and when she was close enough Sif slowed, one hand on her stomach and one at her side, watching him like she wasn't sure if he was real or not.

For a minute, Loki wasn't sure if she was either.

“You came back,” she whispered. Her fingers shook as she reached out to him, touching his chest, his neck, his face, and Loki stepped in the rest of the way. Even with her belly in the way he could still tuck her head against his throat and bury his fingers in her hair. Sif grasped the back of his shirt in her fists and held on like he was going to disappear. It didn't matter that there were people watching or that a mad Titan was coming for Asgard with an army at his back. All that mattered was Sif and the feeling of her in his arms.

“Space is fascinating,” he said quietly enough for only her to hear, “But I fear it lacks your singular company, Sif.” He felt her smile against his skin.

“It has rather good taste in clothing, though.” She leaned back – not too far - and gave him a quick once-over. “What are you wearing, and can you keep it?”

“Dude,” Peter said behind him, and they both turned to look back at the Guardians and Eros clustered at the foot of the ramp. Thor and Jane were having their own reunion, but she touched his face and they paused too. “Dude, Loki, this is your wife?”

Sif tilted her chin up and stepped around Loki, though she kept a hand on his chest. “I am the Lady Sif, Queen of Asgard and commander of her armies,” she said, and Loki felt rather proud to hear the authority in her voice. “I thank you for returning Asgard's king and her princess, the Lady Jane.”

Peter's eyes were comically wide when he looked over at Loki. “Dude,” he repeated. “How the hell did you get a hottie like her to marry an asshole like you?”

“My inherent charm,” Loki replied. “Sif, may I introduce to you the Guardians of the Galaxy – this is Peter Quill, originally of Midgard, and Gamora, Drax, Rocket, and Groot.”

“That one is a tree,” Sif stage-whispered. Groot drew himself up, then bowed slightly.

“I am Groot.”

“Didn't know you for one to stand on protocol, Groot.”

“The raccoon talks—“

“Yes, but he hates to be called that.”

“And the last one.” Sif raised her chin at Eros, who was staring up at the palace, obviously admiring it. “Who is he?”

Before Loki could answer, Eros caught her eye and smiled broadly, bowing as well. “Eros of Titan, my lady,” he said. “You are as radiant as the skies of your home. You know, I haven't been here in ages, not since... Bor, I think? Or perhaps his father. Rather a long time.”

Sif looked up at him quizzically, and despite himself, Loki slipped an arm around her. He hadn't been able to see or touch her for months, and the need was strong. “We have much to discuss,” he said, “Not the least of which is—“
“The reward you promised us for getting' you an' Princess Stardust back here,” Rocket interrupted. Sif was giving him another look now, one much more calculating, and Loki took a breath.

“Not the least of which is our course from here forward,” he finished. “You are all honored guests of the House of Odin for as long as you are here in Asgard.”

“But that can wait until morning,” Sif cut in. “We all need rest.”

Loki turned to her. “But we should really—“

“No.”

“I did give my word that—“

“No.” Sif's whole attention was back on him, her hands grasping the sides of his head as she brought their foreheads together, whispering so only he could hear. “I have missed the feel of your body and the touch of your skin and the taste of your mouth, husband. I would have you to myself for the night.”

The only logical thing to do then was to kiss her, to kiss Sif and let it take the pain of what had happened far away in space from him. Dimly Loki heard Thor loudly ushering everyone toward the palace, but even that went away after a moment. Here with Sif he was home, and for that blissful moment, everything was all right.
Chapter Notes

At long last! This chapter is extra-big and hopefully the end is worth the wait. Thank you, readers, for being so patient all the time. Onward!

*nova*; a nuclear explosion on a white dwarf, which causes a sudden brightening of the star. They are thought to occur on the surface of a white dwarf in a binary system when they are sufficiently near to one another, allowing material to be pulled from the companion star's surface onto the white dwarf.

The Chitauri currently on the rock scattered when Thanos roared in anger. They cowered away from him, and seeing the Other join them only made him more wrathful.

“*Why was he not stopped?*” Thanos hissed. “My brother is little better than useless and yet he waltzed into my space and disrupted something that took years to build!”

“We could not have known—“

“I should not have to explain these things!”

“We were focused on the—they were the Guardians, my lord, they—“

“*Are irrelevant.* Perhaps a little less so after this gaffe, but nonetheless...” Thanos closed his mouth and drew in a breath, let it out. “Nonetheless, we must press on. I am on a schedule, after all.”

Chittering and nervous the Chitauri came forward, the Other at their fore. “What would you have us do?”

“Prepare the army.” Thanos said after a moment of thought. “Contact our Asgardian friend and ensure that our way will be clear and that his end of matters is complete.”

“It will be done.”

Thanos watched as they scattered, a finger dragging over his lips. Matters had become more complicated, but the situation was far from lost. He had planned for control of the Asgardian king – the puppets he’d been shown in other versions of events were useful in their own ways, but he’d liked the poetry of letting this one rise up to fall straight into his hands – but his plant in the palace had the ability.

Things would move forward because they had to. He had too much at stake now.

*“You're a good brother,”* Jane whispered as she let Thor tuck her under his arm and helped hustle people away from Loki and Sif. Peeking back at them, she smiled; Loki was already looking worlds better.

“I am going to be a good husband as soon as these people are settled,” he replied, and Jane couldn’t
stop her grin.

“AFTER we are good parents. Lena’s still up, isn't she?” When Thor made a face, she nudged him. “ Doesn’t matter. I'm home, I'm glad I'm not going to wake her up. And Thor, I'm—“

He stopped then suddenly and pulled her close, and right there in the middle of the palace Jane burst into tears and buried her face in Thor's chest. She had so little time with him, in the grand scheme of their lives. Their children would still be young and vibrant when she was old and gone, and with the news she had to tell him, that thought coupled with how much she'd missed him cracked her.

“I'm home,” she repeated into his chest, wrapping her arms around him, and when she looked up she saw Thor's cheeks were wet too. He cupped her face, thumbs swiping away her tears.

“I have a faster way up to our rooms,” he said, and the next minute Jane was listening to the shouts of the guards as they shot up into the air. She clung to Thor and grinned, watching the movement of the stars and the Branches as they flew through the atrium of the palace and out into the night air, rising until they landed on the balcony of their suite.

“Mommy!”

Jane quickly blinked away the last of her tears, scooping Lena up from the floor and holding her close. “Lena! I missed you, oh my god…”

She closed her eyes, her face full of her daughter's hair and sticky little fingers clinging to her neck. Thor pressed against her back, embracing them both. Jane knew if she started crying then Lena would take it as a signal to cry too, and she couldn't handle it right now. She just wanted to see her daughter smile and hold her for a minute.

“Don’t go again without saying g’bye,” Lena told her, and Jane burst into tears.

*

“No, I am fine,” Loki insisted to the cluster of healers, led by Eir and Frigga, who remained in the receiving room. He'd managed to dispatch the rest of them – the courtiers, the lords and ladies who had felt it their duty to invade the residential areas of the palace and descend en mass to say how very grateful they were to see him home, hale and hearty, a sentiment he'd happily fed back to them. Only his mother had seen through that lie, but then she'd always had that ability.

“What I need is rest and time with my wife,” he told Eir. “If I faint, the guards will bring my prone form down to you for examination, if you want me to come in the morning after I have broken my fast I will do so, but it is very late and I have come a very long way.”

He looked over at Sif, sitting on one of the couches. She had stood with him for a while, but when her back had started to hurt, she'd begged off with a sour look on her face. Knowing Sif, she hated playing weak, but both of them wanted to actually be left alone.

“The Lady Sif needs me more than I need to be stretched out on the Soul Forge for all to see,” he insisted.

“But my king, you look—“

“Tired,” Sif said from her couch. “And so am I. The time candle burns lower by the minute.”

Both Eir and Frigga looked unconvinced, but after exchanging glances, they nodded. Eir bowed first, ushering her team out. Frigga lingered, and Loki let himself be pulled into an embrace the
moment the door closed behind the last healer.

“I missed you so much,” she whispered, kissing his cheek. “It does your poor mother's heart good to see you home, Loki. You will go see Eir in the morning, won't you?”

He pursed his lips together, but nodded. “After breakfast.”

“With all of us?”

“If I must.”

“Then goodnight, my son. Look after him, Sif.”

“I will not let him out of my sight, my lady.”

“I can believe it.” Frigga clasped Sif's hands, then left, and at last they were alone. Sif was looking at him now, and after the weeks of separation and the way their bond sung in his veins, he made the executive decision to put off any discussion until tomorrow.

“Since we are both so tired,” he said, holding out his hands. Sif slipped her fingers into them and he pulled her up, and they walked into the bedroom together.

They undressed silently, reaching out every so often. Sif touched the few new scars he'd gotten, wounds still healing. Her fingers slid along them, resting on his hip, then dragging back up to his cheek. His fingers were in her hair, thumbs brushing across her lips, sliding down to rest on her belly. The baby kicked, and he pressed his palm to the spot. Sif covered his hand with hers.

“He has been very active since you got home,” she told him.

“He?”

“Eir has told me I am carrying a boy.”

Loki kissed her as her hands curled around his neck. “May he be more like you than me,” he said. Sif rolled her eyes.

“You have plenty to offer,” she told him. “Though if whatever happened out there had the effect of humbling you a bit further, I cannot complain.”

She took his hand and tugged him over to the bed. After the bunk on Knowhere, and whatever cubby he could fit himself into on the Milano, nothing looked more inviting than a fur-covered bed with Sif in it.

Sif laid down and reached out to him, and Loki curled up against her. She liked to sleep propped up, and he liked the idea of spending his first night home in this way, his face tucked against her throat and her arm around his shoulders, keeping him from flying off into space again.

*

Coulson held the door open for her as she approached the conference room. “Agent May, always nice to see you. How was Asgard?”

“Interesting.” She stepped inside and he shut the door as she sat, watching him. “Surprised to find you awake at this hour.”

“We've added another shift since SWORD's reports started becoming more alarming. I volunteered
to oversee one of them, it takes the strain off the Director. I'm more of a night owl anyway.”

“"It's almost day. But that's irrelevant – I need to brief you on what happened overnight.”

Coulson sat, opening his folio, and May slid a file across the table.

“"At 2234 hours Asgard time, an unidentified ship appeared in Asgardian airspace that ended up carrying the King and Jane Foster, along with those who had been sheltering and aiding them since the accident in Tromso. I've asked Colonel Danvers to remain behind and come up with profiles.”

“"Did she agree? I know that the Air Force—“

“"Colonel Danvers is staying for further support... and because she thinks that one of them has information about how she got her abilities. But I think she knows how important it is for one of us to be on Asgard right now, too.”

“"Any idea of the climate?”

“"I left after the king and queen went to bed and I wasn't allowed up to their chambers – something about keeping to internal matters until such time as the king had recovered from his ordeal. Typical Asgardian line.”

“"Then we've got no choice but to wait until the Colonel returns.” Coulson collected the file and closed his folio. “I think I'll have to wake the Director with this.”

“"He won't like that.”

“"No, he won't. But I've got more leeway with him than most people do.”

*

“"It's been a long time since I've seen that.”

Carol paused in her flight back up to the room she'd been given to stay in. The one who had come in with the Guardians and the king and Jane – Eros, that was his name, the one who'd given her a second look when they'd passed in the hall. “Seen what?”

“"That star.” With a sweep of his hand, Eros indicated one of the seats out on the balcony, and after a moment's consideration, Carol landed and sat. “The last time I saw it was on a very old friend of mine. You remind me a bit of him, actually.”

“"I don't know you. How could you know anything about me?”

“"The fact that you wear that star tells me a lot. But I do love new friends, and they have the best wine here, so...” he poured her a cup and passed it over. Carol took it but didn't drink, holding the cup in her hands as she eyed him, and Eros grinned at her.

“"You aren't sure if you can trust me.”

“"I just make it a point not to take drinks from men I don't know.”

“"And you're clever! I like you already.”

“"Well, this has sure been fun,” Carol said loudly, setting down her cup of wine, “But I really need to be getting to bed—“
“Wait—wait, please—” and something in Eros' voice made her stop, hovering a foot off the polished floor. Something in his expression had slipped, getting put back into place as she watched him. “Don't you want to know more about him? The man you saved the day you got your powers?”

Carol landed again, much less gracefully, stumbling a bit on numbed feet. “How did you know about that?” she whispered, her eyes wide.

“Word gets around.” Eros gestured at the couch again and she sat. “Now where to start...”

“The beginning.” Carol picked up the cup of wine and took a long swallow from it. “Start at the beginning.”

* *

“So now what do we do?”

They had gathered in one of the rooms they'd taken over in the hotel, everyone perched on beds or chairs or standing somewhere there was room. Natasha was flexing her leg, working it gently but persistently; she was already nearly back to fighting form, or so she said. Steve wondered at that—most people would have been laid up for much longer, but Natasha had always seemed to get back on her feet in half the time.

“I've put out feelers again,” she said now, letting her foot drop to the floor. “Pattern says one more drop. I'll know where and when by tonight.”

“Will you be ready?” Natasha gave him a long, steady look, and Steve put up his hands. “Stupid question, sorry. How about the rest of you? If this is a rabbit hole, we're too deep into it to stop now.”

“We'll be—“ Clint paused when his pocket started vibrating and pulled out his phone. “The boss,” he muttered, and pushed through to the hallway. “Darcy?” they heard, muffled as the door closed. “Darcy, slow down—“

Tony pointed at the door. “What.”

“Not important right now,” Bruce told him. “We got readings when that Asgardian appeared. I think I can use his previous appearances and that data to get an idea of where he might show up next. It's weird, it involves probability and atmospheric physics—but, uh, that's not what's important either.”

“You can track the guy.”

“I can track the guy using Stark's network of satellites. Kind of. This would be easier with all the stuff in the lab back home, but I'm doing my best.”

“Thank you, Banner,” Steve told him. “Let us know if something pops—“

Clint suddenly burst back into the room, his phone pressed to his ear. “I'm going to—hold on, Darcy, everyone else needs to hear this, I'm going to put you on speakerphone. Tell everyone here what you told me.”

He thumbed a button and held the phone out, all of them crowded around to listen as Darcy talked quickly.

“They got back late last night,” she said. “I was informed this morning and I've been running around like crazy trying to get everything under control—“

There was an exasperated sigh. “That’s what I said. They were dropped off by a bunch of other people. They’re still on Asgard right now. I haven’t heard anything more, Loki hasn’t said anything about coming to Earth anytime soon. I’ve been taking calls all day because it got leaked to the press and now the entire world wants to know what the hell is going on and I’m hiding in a utility closet right now just to make this fucking call, Barton, so take me off speaker and let me rant some more about how shitty my job can be.”

Steve made a series of gestures he hoped translated to please go take care of her and Clint gratefully scuttled out of the hotel room and back into the hallway, and there was dead silence in the room until Tony cleared his throat.

“So this changes things a little.”

“Not really.” Natasha crossed her arms; her eyes flicked once to the door and back to them. “We still need to figure out how to stop this Asgardian from giving terrorist cells a material that can punch through any known Earth metal. We need to stop the Winter Soldier—“

“The spook who nearly took you out?”

“Yes,” and Steve heard the tightness in her voice and wondered if he ought to warn Tony off. But Natasha continued. “It’s not a matter of honor so much as it is that he needs to be taken out of the equation. He’s a danger to all of us the longer he's out on the field.”

“But how? There aren’t enough of us to split after two targets and you know what I’ve said…” Steve caught Tony's eyebrows raising, the silent question of so you two have been talking practically writ in the air above his head “...you know that I think we’re being made to fight on too many fronts.”

“Wherever the Asgardian goes, I think he’ll be covered by the Winter Soldier. Nobody wants their supply of Asgardian steel to be interrupted.” She went to the door. “Keep me posted on what you find, would you, Bruce? I’m going to be doing some legwork of my own. I’ll be on channel five if you need me.”

Everyone filtered out slowly, working or getting rest while they could. Steve had the sense he’d get sometimes during the war, that this was but a temporary calm, a trough between two tsunamis that would sweep him off solid ground.

*

She had told the household servants not to wake them – royal schedules would not start until Loki decided he wanted them to, and she doubted that she would have much time to return to normal activity before their son was born. So instead of being awoken before dawn, Sif woke with the morning light filtering through their curtains. Loki was still curled up against her, a leg thrown across hers and an arm tucked across her body as though he would anchor himself to Asgard through her, and Sif slipped her fingers through his and rested her cheek on top of his head, more than happy to be such a tether to their realm.

Her movement had woken him, though. When she leaned her head back Loki blinked up at her sleepily. She did love him best like this, before the world put its sharp hooks into him, when his face was relaxed and his mind calm. She used her free hand to stroke his hair and he sighed, burrowing back down into the furs.

“Cancel everything today,” he mumbled against her shoulder. “I’ll have no part of it. Pressing
“Business?” Sif smiled, her fingers still stroking and oh how she'd missed the feel of his hair, such a small sensation with so much importance. “I thought this would be pleasure.”

“If pleasure is what my lady wife wants, she has but to ask.” He pressed his lips to her shoulder but it was less for arousal and more for adoration, and she basked in it.

“This is what I have missed,” she told him, lifting his chin so she could look into his eyes. Loki kissed her then and it burned so sweetly, familiar and comforting and all that she knew of home.

“How long can you delay going to Eir?” she asked, and had to contain herself at the sight of a sleepy, comfortable Loki trying to look sly.

“I only said in the morning, but I did not specify this one,” he mumbled, already sinking back into the mattress and pressing against her.

“As it happened Eir did just that, sweeping into the room on a wave of flustered household attendants and her own helpers after all but hammering down the door. Sif watched in amusement as Eir pulled Loki over to one of the couches and made him be still while she gave him a very thorough examination, ignoring all complaints and protestations that he was feeling just fine, that he did not need to be treated like a child.

“This would all have been so much easier had you come to the Healing Rooms,” she told him briskly after bidding him sit quietly for the third time. “As I had instructed you, I believe. A simple scan, a moment in the Soul Forge, and you would have been done, so do not complain now that this is taking too long.”

“Sif,” Loki began plaintively, straining to sit up and look at her, but made a face when she snorted and shook her head. “I see I'll have no aid from my lady wife.”

“Far be it from me to argue with our master healer.”

“A wise thing to say, Lady Sif, as you should have brought him down in the first place.” Eir gave her such a look that Sif had to duck her head to hide her grin behind a hand. “I hope you did not exert yourself too much lat night. With how close you are to your time, it would be unwise. Oh, stop squirming, my king, Sif and your son are in perfect health and we all want them to stay that way, which requires rest.”

Loki was sullenly quiet the rest of the time, letting Eir give him a thorough going-over before pronouncing him quite well. “I am concerned about something,” she said as she rolled her sleeves back down slowly. “You seem to exhibit a lot of the symptoms of prolonged strain on your reserves of magic, but as far as I can tell you are not at the point of exhausting them at all. I cannot determine more about it at this time...”

“Let me guess,” Loki muttered sourly, pulling on a tunic. “If I came to the Healing Room...”

“...we would know straightaway, yes. But I suppose that if you start to feel worse, you know to come to me. Perhaps rest is what you need... and it could only be the stress of being away from Sif. The marriage spells are quite powerful things, and nobody has ever tested them the way you two have. I am glad that it has held, though.” She smiled then. “And I am happy for you both. You are going to have a healthy child, a son, and you are together again. As you belong.”

Sif felt Loki's fingers brush against the tips of hers, and when Eir had left he sat on the bed and
turned his face into her shoulder again.

“As we belong,” he repeated. Sif took his hand and held it to her heart a moment before she sat back.

“Something happened out there,” she said, gesturing to the sky painted with the dimmer daytime wash of the Branches. “Something that left you thus.”

“You heard Eir. I am fine.”

“You lie. Something taxed your powers beyond anything else. Loki, be honest with me... how worried should I be?”

“Sif...” Loki laced their fingers, and she felt his hands trembling just slightly. “Sif, my lady... you should be terrified.”

*

“At least you come to the Healing Rooms when asked,” Eir muttered when Jane hopped up onto the Soul Forge. Thor looked up from where he'd been straightening Lena's tunic.

“Did Loki not come?”

“He seemed to think come see me immediately this morning meant lay in bed past breakfast and ignore obligations.”

Jane gave Thor a look of mock alarm, and he hid a smile in Lena's silky hair. Their daughter was busy watching as the Soul Forge lit up above Jane, her eyes growing wide.

“Mommy?” she asked, pointing at the holographic projection.

“Yes,” Thor told her. “Very good, that is your mother.” He looked up at it and froze. Lena sensed something was different and started to squirm, but Thor locked eyes with Jane and made a motion with his head. Jane looked sheepish.

“I felt bad that it was Loki and people from space who found out first, and I wanted to tell you last night,” she said. “But... look, you've let Lena get into some bad habits, it took so long to get her down and then I was tired because I'd literally traveled across the universe, and...”

“Jane, it's all right.” He reached over and took her hand. “Lady Eir?”

“Everything appears to be normal – with the child and the mother. You have some wounds, Lady Jane...”

“Well, we got into a few fights.”

“Fights?” Thor asked.

“People were shooting at us, so when they gave me a gun, I shot back.”

“They know you well, then.” Thor put Lena on his hip and leaned over, kissing Jane's forehead before she sat up. “I am more amused that Loki let you do anything knowing you are pregnant, given that he treats Sif like she's made of glass, and you are one of the only people of Midgard he actually likes.”

“Loki knows better than to get in my way, then. And I'd hope he knows better than to get in Sif's way by this point, but...”
“We can always have hope he will learn.” Thor took Jane's hand as they walked, and after a while Lena squirmed and was allowed to run on ahead. Jane seemed pensive, and confident that the Einherjar posted at the far end of the corridor would keep Lena from running off too far he stopped them in an alcove. “Is everything all right, Jane?”

“Yes. No. *I'm* fine, but things... things out there,” she made a gesture at the ceiling, “Are not fine. I'm sure we'll have some kind of meeting about it, but I'm scared, Thor, scared that something out there is going to take away the world for our children. For *us*. I'm scared that even being here won't protect us.”

“I swore to you that I would keep you safe,” Thor told her, but he was glad when she shook her head and leaned forward to embrace him, for he knew she would see that he was full of doubt.

*“I still can't believe they're married,” Peter stage-whispered over his cup of mead. Gamora eyed it, and then him; this was his second, and after only a few sips she'd had to put her own cup aside in favor of water. Quill was Terran, more or less, and whatever his feelings she knew he'd want to be sober for this. Not that she didn't share his sentiment, because she found it equally incomprehensible that anyone would want to put up with Loki, much less have the kind of bond with him that this Queen Sif clearly did. Perhaps there was something to the man she'd seen through the cracks, the few times they'd talked on board the Milano.

Plucking the cup from Peter's hands, she put a cup of water in its place. “Stay away from the mead,” she told him, and made her way over to where Sif was standing, talking to Jane. Even as she approached, Gamora could tell that Sif was watching her carefully. When Jane caught Gamora's eye and moved off, Sif turned to face her more fully.

“Gamora, is it not?” she said. “Loki has told me you are a warrior of great renown.”

“He said the same thing about you.”

There must have been some disbelief in her face or voice, because Sif's eyebrows rose just slightly. “My current condition has no bearing on my deadliness. But it behooves me to let people think it does.”

“Nothing beats the element of surprise.” She waited a moment, sipping her water before continuing. “Loki says you use a sword – your fighting styles must work well together.”

“I would like to think so. We have fought beside each other for hundreds of years, after all.”

She looked across the room to where Loki was speaking to the woman with the almost-Nova star on her chest and Thor, and Gamora caught the way Sif's lips twitched upward, the way her fingers rested just briefly on her stomach before slipping off again – and the way that Loki glanced over a moment later as though Sif had tapped him on the shoulder. He looked better than he had in the whole time he'd been with them, more rested and relaxed. Whatever these two had, weird as it was, it clearly worked.

“I hear you have some skill with a blade as well,” Sif said. She was smiling a bit more now. “Perhaps once this belly of mine is out of the way, we may cross them. A friendly bout, of course.”

“I'd like that. Though I don't know how long we'll be sticking around – I think Quill wants to leave soon.”

“Then perhaps I shall make a trip out to the stars.”
“Or maybe I'll come back to visit. I've never been anywhere like Asgard.”

“There is no place like it in all the realms, either of Yggdrasil or beyond it. You would be an honored guest, Lady Gamora. For your part in bringing my husband back to me, you will always be honored by our house.”

She didn't know what to say to that – for someone to place such gratitude before her, without knowing who and what she was had never happened before. But Gamora couldn't doubt Sif's sincerity.

Luckily she didn't have to flounder too long. Loki had finished his conversation and came over now, and there was a conversation in their glances, the subtle way that Sif leaned into him and he leaned down to her for just a moment before they straightened and were Queen and King.

“Is everyone present?” Loki asked, getting the attention of the room. From where they were deep in conversation, the woman with the star and Thanos' brother looked up; Thor sat beside Jane on a couch. “Is everyone sober, or close enough? Then let us begin.”

He let Sif use his hand to balance lowering herself to a seat on one of the couches, and then sat beside her. “We have little time, so I will, for once, be succinct. There is an Infinity Stone here, along with the Gauntlet, and little doubt in my mind that the Mad Titan—“

“I thought he was a story to frighten us as children,” Thor muttered, but it was loud enough for Loki to stop and give him a chilling look.

“He is most decidedly real, Thor, and Asgard is calling him.”

“The Tesseract.” Thor looked at Sif, who looked over at Loki.

“The Vault is secure,” she told him. “Both the Tesseract and the Gauntlet are safe within it, and all the safeguards are in place. I have had Edwik double the patrols around the entrance and the approaches.”

“It will not be enough.” Loki eyed Gamora. “You know.”

“She doesn't need to say anything.” The man who said he was Thanos' brother leaned against one of the gilded columns. “Or you don't need to make her say anything. I haven't been an entirely absent figure in my brother's life—“

“More the reason for you to be quiet,” Loki told him, his voice icy. “I have no reason to believe anything you say.”

“No, you don't. But it wouldn't hurt you to listen to it.”

“We have to see to the defense of this realm and the other eight,” Sif cut in. “There will be time for bickering later. But for now, let's get to work.”

* 

They emerged from the room silent, thoughtful. Jane swept off to the Hall of Science, looking as she always did for answers in her work; the others filtered off to their rooms, to empty halls, somewhere to find a place to think. Gamora and Sif went off together, talking quietly.

Thor hung back, though he wanted to go after Jane and needed to see to Lena and had thinking of his own to do. Loki had gone to the balcony, leaning on it and looking out over the city. The
buildings had all been repaired from the attack led by Surtur, but in his mind's eye Thor still saw Asgard aflame. He hadn't been here for the first attacks, but he could only imagine them, and it made his chest tighten; he could only imagine what it had done to Sif or Loki. Wordlessly he came up beside his brother.

“You will keep Asgard safe,” he said at last. The corners of Loki's mouth turned down.

“You have no way of knowing that, Thor.”

“I do. I know you, Brother, and I know what you will do for what you want. If you want Asgard to be safe from Thanos, you will find a way to do it.”

“You are so optimistic.” Loki turned to look at him now, unconsciously picking at his cuticles. “It is a nice sentiment, but that is all it is. We face a foe so terrifying that no one dared write his name into books for fear it would bring him here, and now that I have seen him, I understand. Thor, I am... I am afraid.”

“I think that means you are wiser than you would have others believe betimes.” Thor paused, then reached forward, pulling his brother into a tight embrace. After a moment he felt Loki return it, and they were not a ruler and an Avenger but two brothers who would always be there for each other, who knew each other better than anyone else.

“I am glad you made it home, Loki,” Thor told him. Much to his surprise, Loki smiled just a bit.

“Space was terribly quiet without you there. We shouldn't dawdle here, though... I saw Sif talking to Gamora, and I am not sure I want that kind of mutual enabling to occur.”

Thor followed his brother out of the room, his heart lighter. Loki would never say that he had missed his brother, but it had been there in his face for Thor to see in a kind of openness that would never had been present a decade ago. Whatever happened, he had his brother back, and that was all Thor had ever wanted.

*

Decisions were made a few days later.

Outside on the wide parade ground outside the palace, the Guardians had gathered around the Milano. Eros was there too, looking sideways at Colonel Danvers, who was pointedly ignoring him. A few Einherjar were helping Peter load chests onto the ship, though it was more the Einherjar working and Peter being bemused by the fact the chests floated, which was apparently as novel in his part of space as it was on Earth.

“You have been given your reward, as agreed upon,” Loki said. “I suppose you'll be off now to spend it.”

“Don't sound so surprised, Your High-n-mightiness,” Peter replied jovially. “You're the one told us we were pirates five minutes after meeting us. We're just doin' what pirates do. Besides, we have a living to make, and it's not like you're gonna miss it.”

“We're better off back where we belong, keeping an eye on Thanos' movements,” Gamora added. Below them, pushing a chest into position, Rocket snorted.

“Groot n'me are takin' our shares and getting as far away from all you idiots as we can. No way are we going to wait around and be mashed to a pulp by some crazy purple guy.”
“That'll be a discussion for another time,” Gamora muttered.

“I will remain with my companions, Gamora and Peter Quill,” Drax told them. “Thanos is responsible for the murder of my family. I will have my revenge.”

“Glad we can always count on you, buddy.” Peter tucked his thumbs in his belt. “But we'll be off. There's no reason for us to stay, other than you wanting our company.”

“I'm off too, I suppose.” Eros shrugged. “Like them, I'm more use out there than here. Asgard doesn't change that much after all.”

“You will always be welcome here, all of you, as personal guests of the House of Odin.” Sif stepped up before Loki could say anything else. “For your part in returning Jane Foster and Loki to us, you will always be honored in Asgard's halls.”

Thor put his arm around Jane as the Milano lifted off and sped into the Branches-filled sky, disappearing from sight in a few minutes.

“I'm going to miss them,” Jane said quietly. “They were interesting. Though I wonder why all aliens are so humanoid?”

“There is a walking, talking tree among them.”

“And Groot still has two arms and two legs and a head.” She watched the place where the Milano had disappeared into a cloud, her brow furrowed. “I've got a bad feeling, Thor. But I can't do anything about it.” She shook her head and took his hand, leading him inside in the wake of the others who had come out to see the Guardians off. “Let's get Lena and go home. Maybe I'll figure out what's bothering me with a pint of ice cream and all the reading I've got to catch up on.”

“You and your work...”

“Well, they don't deliver Astroparticle Physics to Knowhere.”

With Lena in hand, they took a short flight out to Heimdall's Observatory. Sif embraced them both as tightly as she could. When Loki came round, he hesitated only a moment before embracing her of his own accord.

“This is the second of these that I have partaken of in the space of seven days,” he told her, stepping back and putting his hands on her shoulders. “I believe that is some sort of record.”

“I think it is too.” Grinning, Jane put her hands on top of his. They'd shared a lot out in the blackness of space. “Take care of yourself. Don't smother Sif, she'll be fine.”

Loki made a face. “I shall endeavor not to.”

“Call us when the baby comes, okay?”

“Of course.” They stepped apart and Jane took Lena's other hand, holding on tightly. She and Thor glanced at each other and stepped forward.

“Whenver you're ready, Heimdall,” she said. “Open the Bifrost.”

* 

“Everything is ready for you.”
The Titan stood before his throne, staring out over the space of Sanctuary. Over the last two weeks, his army had gathered its strength. Below, Surtur paced, his sword in one hand and the Scepter in the other. Perhaps it was unwise to let a Stone out of his sight, keep it in its case where it could potentially fall into enemy hands, but Thanos had subdued Surtur once and could do it again at will, and when the Gauntlet was in his hands he would have no more need of such an unstable ally.

“Asgard?” he asked.

“The pretender and his queen prepare the realm, but it will not be enough. As fearful as he is, Loki has underestimated you.” The cloaked figure paused. “You will not harm the queen? She will have her prince any day now.”

“I would think that you would want the whelp out of the picture.”

“It will be an easy way to control her, bastard halfbreed though it will be. She always thought that she would be above such a thing, but now she has a little leash...”

“That is inconsequential. I will uphold my end of the bargain, Asgardian, if you have upheld yours.”

“The Aether is secured deep within Asgard.”

“The Tesseract and the Gauntlet?”

“They will not be a problem. The Vault is not impenetrable.”

“Good. Return and await my word.”

* *

“It seems I just saw you off, my prince, Lady Jane.” The rumble of the Bifrost machinery spinning down nearly drowned out Heimdall’s voice, but he had a way of projecting it that cut through any noise. Jane smiled up at him; over the last four years, she’d gotten a lot more comfortable with the Gatekeeper than she’d been before.

“We wanted to stop by and celebrate the start of Yule before we go back and have Christmas with my family. The agreement was every other year, so...”

“The little princess is with her mortal family, then?”

“My mom wanted to see her.”

The walls slowed and stopped with a dull thud, and Heimdall nodded them through. “Welcome home to Asgard,” he told them, and turned back to his post.

“I think that is the longest conversation I’ve had with him in ages,” Jane whispered. Thor smiled and put his hand on the small of her back as they walked out to where Sif, looking even larger than she had when they’d left two weeks ago, waited by a gun-boat.

“He likes you. Hello, Sif.” He reached over to embrace her and ended up awkwardly wrapping an arm around her from the side instead. “Has my nephew decided to stay another nine months?”

“It seems that way with every passing day.” Sif seemed irritable about something, and Jane greeted her quickly and took a seat near the bow of the boat. After a brief discussion Sif joined her, and Thor took the rudder, steering them expertly toward the palace.

“How are you feeling?” Jane asked, pushing windswept hair out of her face.
“Thrice my size in all respects.” Sif directed Thor toward a docking balcony on the upper levels so she wouldn't have to walk so far, then turned back to Jane. “My back aches every day, my organs seem to be pushed into unnatural places and configurations, and I have not seen my feet for the last two months but they no longer fit into my boots, so I have had to go about my business in slippers. It is the least dignified I have ever felt.”

“Loki’s been helping you get around, right?”

“Loki,” Sif said, making a face, “Has become insufferable.”

“Become’?” Thor muttered. Sif heard it and cast a glare in his direction.

“Your brother is even more of a nuisance now than he was before,” she told him. “Treating me as though I am about to break, telling others to treat me with more care...”

“He is only trying to look out for your well-being and happiness. Since it seems your son will arrive at any time—“

“He is being overbearing and overprotective and it is driving me mad. It is not as though I walk around blindfolded and bouncing off the walls...”

Jane bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Thor seemed very focused on landing them carefully on the balcony. Luckily, Sif didn't notice. One of her guards, looking sheepish, had put a stepstool down in front of the gun-boat so she could more easily step off, and despite her sour look she thanked him quietly.

“You both have had a lot going on lately – I remember Yule last year, it's a busy time for you both. And I'm sure he's just worried about you.”

“He is. I am nervous too, yet...” Sif sighed, waddling heavily onto one of the platforms meant for going between levels more easily. Once everyone was on board, she waved her hand over the control orb and it lifted off, flying gently up toward the royal chambers. “I wish he would trust me a bit more.”

“He does,” Jane told her. “I spent months in space with him, remember.”

“I know. And I do know he trusts me.” Sif let them into the receiving room off their bedchamber, then sighed and held up a hand. “But he still does things like this. Watch.”

She picked a metal goblet off a tray and dropped it onto the floor, then screwed up her face and shouted, “Loki!”

A moment later he appeared in a flash of green light, looking flustered. “Sif! What is it, is it the baby, are you all right—“

Sif pointed at the goblet. “I dropped it,” she told him. “I cannot bend over to pick it up.”

Completely oblivious to Thor and Jane's presence (Thor seemed to have developed a burning need to chew on his thumbnail, and Jane elbowed him in the ribs), Loki plucked the goblet off the floor, filled it with water, and handed it back to Sif.

“Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I am quite well.” Sif sat, drinking from the goblet. “That is all I needed.”
“Nice to see you again, Loki,” Jane said loudly. Thor made a strangled noise that could have been a laugh.

“Oh, Jane.” Loki seemed distracted, still watching Sif closely. “I did not see you there.”

“I am here too, Brother,” Thor said. He sounded constipated.

“Yes,” Loki said vaguely. “Well, Sif...”

“I am fine. I will call you if I need you.”

“Very well.” Loki vanished again in a swirl of verdant light, and Sif rolled her eyes.

“See?”

Thor burst out laughing. “I hope for both your sakes you are delivered soon,” he said, once the combined weight of Jane and Sif glaring at him had caused him to subside a little. “Otherwise one of you will murder the other, and I cannot tell which it will be or how.”

“Lady Eir assures me that he could arrive any day now, but it will be on his own time.”

“Strong-willed like his parents.” Thor reached across and took Sif’s hand. “I am glad for both of you. I would apologize for my brother, but...”

“Save your breath. He is responsible for his own actions, and he knows it.” Sif looked at them, a bit abashed. “Normally I would show you to your rooms, but...”

“We know the way,” Jane assured her.

Once they were out in the hallway, she punched her husband in the arm. “Could you be more rude?”

Thor started snickering again. “I have never in all my life seen Loki in this state. I am not going to let it pass unappreciated.”

“It’s not—okay, it’s a little funny, but... Thor, your brother is out of his mind, and we need to help him.”

“I sorted it out myself when Lena was born!”

“You and Loki are very different animals. Seriously, Thor,” and Jane tried to look stern but couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “This kid better come soon or Loki is going to have a stroke.”

“If Sif does not strangle him first.”

*

The time candle guttered low when Sif opened her eyes. For the last few weeks she’d grown used to interrupted sleep, and now even Loki would only blearily ask if she was all right before dropping back himself. She could never get comfortable enough to sleep the night through anymore, and now when Loki shifted and raised his head, Sif stroked his hair back until he closed his eyes and nestled back down, never having said a word. She felt guilty for waking him at all; despite his continued protests that he was fine, that he’d recovered from his time in space, she could see the circles under his eyes. Getting out of bed, Sif began her usual ritual whenever she awoke hours before dawn, when the rest of the palace slept; she began to walk.

Never very far, or very fast; a few circles of the levels of the palace their chambers were on at most.
But it helped wear her down and let her get back to sleep. When cramps overtook her, as they sometimes did, she was able to stop and press a hand into her back or walk them off, and then get back to sleep.

One came on now, and grimacing, Sif rubbed her stomach as the pain passed from her lower back on forward. Eir had said she would have them randomly, but that she would just know when true labor pains came on. When Sif had asked just how it was that she, a first-time mother, would just know, Eir had smiled and said that Sif was an intelligent woman and would figure it out.

Perhaps she’d been rather short with Eir during that appointment.

Sif ran her fingertips along the balcony railing as she walked along it. Being so close to Yule, the air was chilly, and a few snowflakes drifted down in the golden lights of the city. What a beautiful time it was to bring her son into the realms, to show him his home. Sif smiled, and like a child, reached out to try and catch a snowflake on her palm. As she did, another pain came on, and Sif leaned back from the railing and settled herself on a bench to wait it out.

“Not long now,” she murmured, stroking her stomach. Her son hadn’t moved much in the last few days, which Eir had seemed to take as a sign that labor was imminent. Sif would believe it, apparently, when she just knew. But she wanted it to be soon, more to meet this child she and Loki had made together than for her own comfort, though it would be good to bend over again.

The pain passed, and Sif rose and started walking again, the length of the hallway and back, looping around past the bedchamber where Jane and Thor resided and back up the short flight of stairs to the royal bedchamber blazoned with the sign of the House of Odin. Her banner hung on one side and Loki’s on the other, and the guards opened the door for her as she waddled up.

“How are you feeling, my queen?” one of them asked quietly.

“Large. Is there any news?”

“Edwik was here not two hours past. He reports it is all quiet.”

“Good. I’m going back to bed, Ulrich. Be vigilant.”

“Yes, my lady.”

He shut the door behind her. Sif had to lean against the bedchamber doorjamb before she could go in – pain had rippled from her back to her stomach yet again. As she passed the bed with her still-sleeping husband in it and pushed through the curtains onto the balcony, she wondered if she ought to rouse Eir... but doing that would wake Loki and make him fuss, and she was not sure she wanted to deal with that right now. Besides, Asgard was distractingly beautiful tonight, the Branches glowing as they spread across the sky in their glory. Rubbing her stomach, Sif looked up at them, tracing each back to the trunk—and then gasped, gripped again by a contraction.

Never had they happened thus, she thought, leaning on the balcony wall. Usually they subsided after one or two, but... she looked down at her stomach, counting breaths slowly, deliberately, gritting her teeth when the pain rose again a few minutes later.

Just know indeed, she thought to herself, and made her slow way back to the bed, leaning on it as she shook Loki by the shoulder.

“Wake up,” she hissed. “Loki, wake up.”
He snorted and kicked out, throwing a pillow off the bed in his suddenness. Blinking sleep from his eyes, Loki focused on her. “Sif?” he said, voice rough. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” she said, excitement and nervousness taking hold in equal parts. “Loki, I am... it’s time, Loki.”

He took a moment to process what she said, then he was standing, his clothes glittering into existence around him, gripping her by the arms. She was glad for it; a contraction came on strongly, and she had to fist her hands in his jacket to keep her knees from buckling.

“Soon?” he asked, and despite all his worrying up to this point he was calm now, and she was glad for it, because her heart had begun to race and her breath was coming short.

“I am not sure. We need to get to Eir, though. Now.”

Loki put an arm around her, steadying her as she put on a loose robe over her thin night clothes, and together they left the bedchamber. Since she had just gone inside the guards were startled to see her come back out and with the king, no less, but once they figured out what was happening one went ahead to warn Eir and the other stayed with them, a silent escort. With pain gripping her abdomen every few minutes, the way seemed long, but Sif ground her teeth and held tightly to Loki’s arm. It was more intense than anything she had felt before, but there had been uncountable numbers of women before her who had given birth and there would be many more after, and she would do this as she did all things.

Eir greeted them at the door and led them into a room Sif had only visited a few times during her appointments. The birthing chambers here were not like the spare hospital rooms of Midgard; women of Asgard tended toward giving birth in water, and a wide bath of clear water took up most of the room. Fountains around the walls filled the air with soothing sounds, making it easier for Sif to breathe through the pain as she sat and let Eir examine her. Loki’s steady hand in hers made it easier too, and she met his eyes, smiling just a little.

“Nervous, Loki?”

“I’m quite terrified, if you must know.”

“Then we are of the same mind.” Sif winced, gripping his hand tightly, and Eir looked up.

“Your contractions are not yet close enough together, but in a few hours perhaps. Loki – my king – help her walk, and check in with us every so often. It will help.”

So they walked slowly, up and down the corridors of the Healing Rooms. Only a few were left recovering after Surtur’s attacks, and they visited the ones who were awake despite the hour. Many of them clasped Sif’s hands and wished her luck and congratulated them both, beaming despite their injuries.

“You are a good queen to Asgard, my lady,” one said, his voice muffled through thick bandages covering burns, “And you a good king, Your Majesty. This child will be the best of both of you.”

By the time they had made it back out into the main courtyard, others had assembled. Thor and Jane were there, and Frigga hugged Loki and then Sif.

“I am so excited,” she whispered. “Eir has said you have some time yet?”

“Not too long, hopefully. It’s rather uncomfortable to walk around and suddenly feel like my midsection is being squeezed.”
Time seemed to fade into a cycle of walking, holding on to either Loki or Thor or Frigga or Eir, sitting to rest, contractions coming regularly but not yet strong enough, not yet fast enough, but only an eyerblink later (or perhaps hours later, for she caught the sun filtering in through the gauzy curtains in the birthing room), she was being undressed and helped into the carved stone couch, the cool water of the pool lapping at her thighs. She was aware of Loki's hand, gripped tight in hers, and his other arm wrapped around her shoulders. He was behind her, pressed up against the side of the pool, and Sif leaned her head back against his shoulder. The waves of pain came one on top of the other, and she was tired.

"It's time, Sif," she heard him say, and felt his cool lips press to her forehead. "It's time. Eir is telling you to push."

Holding on to him, Sif bore down, pushing as each wave crested over her. Eir and Frigga were before her, coaching her, but it was Loki that grounded her to the realm, anchored her when the pain seemed too much to bear.

"The child's head is free!" Frigga told her. The old queen's skirts were wet to the waist even though she had tied them up like a common city-dweller. Her eyes were bright as she gripped Sif's thigh hard, making her focus. "This will be the shoulders – push hard, Sif!"

When the next contraction hit, Sif screamed as she pushed, longer and harder than before, and something within her seemed to give way as Frigga reached down between Sif's legs. There was a gentle splash, and after scooping water up with her hand and letting it fall back down, Frigga looked up, beaming at them as their baby's cries filled the chamber.

"He is healthy and strong," she said. When she had freed him of the afterbirth and washed him a little more, she waded up beside Sif and Loki, and while Eir coached Sif through the last part of the delivery, Frigga wrapped the child in a warm towel and held him out to Loki.

"Your son," she told him. With a look of wonder on his face, Loki carefully shifted the child into his arms, touching his son's face with a fingertip.

"My son," he whispered. "Our son, Sif!"

Sif was sitting up on the birthing ledge, her thighs and stomach still wet from being cleansed of the messiness of labor. "Give him to me," she said, half a demand, and Loki turned and let her take the bundle from his arms. Of course, he settled right at her side, an arm around her shoulders as she pulled the towel apart a little bit so she could see him.

"Oh, he is beautiful," she murmured, her fingers stroking his cheeks and his head, still damp and compressed from birth. "So beautiful, so perfect, so..."

The baby let out a cry, waving a tiny fist, and Sif laughed through tears that had started to slide down her cheeks as she shifted him to her breast. "Taste and see, little one," she told him when he latched. "And know your name is Ullr."

Eir looked up at the announcement of the name, but Frigga seemed unsurprised, smiling as she put up her hair. "Ullr," she repeated. "A good name for a prince."

"Ullr Lokason." Sif looked up at him and Loki leaned over to kiss her. Through the bond she felt an echo of his joy (and how could she not when her own heart was full of it?) and smiled, kissing him again when he would have pulled away.

"Ullr Lokason indeed," she said quietly. "Asgard had best prepare itself. It has not seen a mischief-
maker like this little one for a thousand years.”
The first few whimpers woke him, and before Sif could struggle out from under his arm, Loki got up. The noises from the bassinet would soon turn into full-blown wails, if the last few nights had been any indication, and then neither of them would be asleep.

“I'll take care of him,” Loki said, pulling the furs back up around Sif's shoulders. “If he needs you I'll wake you, but get some rest.”

Sif made a grunting noise of assent, and Loki brushed her cheek with his fingers before walking over to the bassinet placed close by the hearth so Ullr could be kept warm and comfortable. Nestled in Loki’s own childhood blanket, his son squirmed fretfully, little fists waving until he was picked up and rested against his father's shoulder.

“All right,” Loki murmured, sending threads of green magic ahead of him to part the curtains. “Let us go look over our realm, hm?”

The first night after Ullr's birth had been spent barely sleeping, barely wanting to sleep; when dawn had touched the tallest spires with its light, Sif and Loki had just dropped off, Ullr held secure in his mother's arms and Loki cradling them both. He had been unwilling to waste a moment of this time, this first day with his son. But Frigga had reminded him gently that afternoon that he had the whole of his life to spend getting to know the person Ullr would grow up to become, and Sif had been exhausted besides, so they had both tried to get some sleep.

That idea had been nice, but hadn't worked out in practice so far. Loki thought they would get the hang of it eventually, but that would probably be when Ullr got the hang of sleeping.

Ullr whimpered again, but it was quieter this time, and Loki was glad for it. It meant that he had likely neither soiled himself or needed feeding, and only wanted comfort. Shifting his son from his shoulder into the cradle of his arms, Loki stood at the balcony's edge.

“See above us the stars, where I traveled for many days before coming back to you,” he said quietly. “And the Branches of Yggdrasil, the World's Tree, she that gives us life and holds us firm in her arms. From her all the best gifts flow.” Ullr had gone quiet but hadn't fallen asleep, his eyes just barely open. He was watching his father, and Loki smiled down at him, still amazed that this tiny perfect being had anything of himself in it. Whatever ill omens his blood carried, none of them seemed to have been transferred to his son.

“Asgard is the jewel of the Nine Realms,” he continued, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “We watch over the other eight. We watch the stars, and all know who we are. I am Asgard's king, and you, my son, you are its prince.”
He talked until Ullr was asleep again and laid in his crib. Scrubbing his face, Loki made for his own bed, sliding in behind Sif and draping an arm over her, taking her hand as she half-woke.

“Ullr?”

“Sleeping again.”

“Good.” Sif curled against him a little more – even with the hearth still putting out heat and the bed covered in furs, the Yule chill had seeped into the room. While he wasn't susceptible to it, Sif was, and Loki was only too happy to oblige her dramatically-sought need for him to balance out being too hot with a nice cool body at her back. Despite needing to rest and regain her strength after giving birth, Sif seemed determined to meet life with squared shoulders and Ullr swaddled against her body, and Loki would do anything she needed to help keep her going forward, especially if it meant holding her as she slept. With what was to come, he would enjoy this peace while he had it.

*

“Agent Brand! It's happening again!”

Brand put her tablet down and climbed up to Telemetry. SWORD's orbital base was oriented so that this area, the control and monitoring section, was pointed away from Earth. Because of the base's antigrav units (reverse-engineered from Asgard tech, naturally) it felt like walking on a very slightly inclined surface, though when their view included a sliver of Earth, it was disorienting.

“Show me,” she told the tech once she got to Telemetry's station. When the data appeared on an auxiliary screen, Brand read it through twice to be sure of what it said. “How accurate is this? What's the time delay between us and that sector?”

“At least six hours. Our experiments haven't shown consistent data.” The tech's eyes were wide, and she looked scared. Brand thought she didn't look scared enough. “This is larger than any other disturbances we've registered in that sector. Based on this, whatever was there isn't there anymore.”

“Can you give me a vector? Anything?”

“It'll be a range, ma'am, a cone of probability. I can do the calculations and give you suggestions based on that, but it'll take me some time.”

“That's fine. Send the results directly to my tablet when you're done, do you understand? I'm going to go planetside and show this to the Director myself, so you have the time it takes for me to get from here to Director Fury's face.”

“It'll be done before you make reentry, Agent Brand.” The tech turned back to her station, and Brand strode back, scooping up her tablet and jacket on the way. The shuttle life support always overcompensated for the heat of reentry, and with what she'd just learned on her mind, she already felt ice cold.

*

Frigga was quiet as they descended into the heart of Asgard, down to the level of the Vault. Not trusting himself around the Tesseract alone and unwilling to bring Sif down – she rarely went anywhere without Ullr, and he did not want his son and his potential abilities with magic around the Tesseract at not even a week of life – Loki had gone to his mother. There was now the added benefit of Frigga adding her own magic to his warding spells, but she would watch him far more closely, and as they drew close she did speak up, stopping before the great golden doors.
“The Vault is secure already.”

“I want to be sure.” Loki placed his hand upon one of the doors, palm pressed to the cool metal in the center of a circle of runes. Frigga sighed and mirrored him. “Can it withstand the Titan as it is now?”

His mother’s jaw tightened as wisps of magic shone gold-green and spiraled down her arm to be sucked into the door. Loki poured his own spells in, and the runes around his hand lit up green, magic tracing up the designs and trickling into the walls of the Vault itself.

“I had hoped rumors of his return were false. They were used to frighten us as children, Loki, by warriors on Vanaheim who had been alive the last time the Titan had been seen in the Realms. They remembered him, and you could tell them by sight, they always looked half-dead already.”

“He is a nightmare.” Loki began weaving other spells into the fabric of the Vault's defenses, and when she grasped what he was doing Frigga added her power to it. “He'll come here. I got away, and he wants me for some purpose. You know what he showed me...”

“What could have been. What I Saw.”

“What you changed. Glad I am for it, Mother, despite that my sleep has suffered the last few days.”

“Glad I am as well, my son.”

His thoughts strayed again to Sif, to his son. “He has a traitor here, a spy. If I cannot find this traitor and stop them, I fear...”

He met his mother's eyes, and they were steel. She had ever been a weapon sheathed in silks, and when she chose to show it, it was terrifying.

“Then we must not fail Asgard,” she said simply.

When they were finished Loki pushed open the doors. The steps seemed dim, though he knew once he reached the floor of the Vault proper the ambient light of the chamber would brighten in response to the presence of a ruler of Asgard.

“Loki?”

“I want to see for myself,” he said over his shoulder, and made himself take the stairs, one at a time. His boots seemed loud on the stone, and the protections of the Vault barely whispered over his skin. They knew their king very well indeed.

The Gauntlet's niche was first, and Loki saw that of the six spheres meant to contain the power of the Stones, five glimmered. The Gauntlet had been made for the Stones, and it resonated with their power; that five were awake meant that the Aether had been found as well, despite Edwik's efforts to locate it first and bring it back still aslumber. The only one not lit was...

Loki turned, and on its plinth at the end of the Vault before the mesh holding back the Destroyer, the Tesseract still sat. It remained dim, and Loki breathed relief into his bones; he had worried that the false Tesseract and the finding of the Tesseract's sibling Stones would reawaken it. But slept it did, only the barest press of its presence registering against his mind, and that was easily shaken off. On a whim he placed a fingertip on the plinth, and a faint green tendril snaked from his wrist out to the stone and was absorbed. Insurance, he thought. Always best when dealing with cosmic forces.

As he turned to go, Loki paused, and took the few steps over to the other plinth. The Casket of
Ancient Winters was not nearly as powerful as the least of the Infinity Stones (if there was indeed one among the Six that could be considered lesser in nature), but it was useful, and Loki placed a tendril of magic on that plinth too.

The Casket flickered once, twice, and then appeared solidly present again.

Loki pressed his lips together as he climbed the steps back out of the Vault, the doors rumbling shut behind him. Always best to hedge his bets.

*

Sif watched the Einherjar trainees drill, their feet kicking up clouds of sand off the training ring. She idly tugged up an edge of the cloth to make sure Ullr’s face was covered against the dust, her hand resting against the warmth of her son’s body as she walked between the rows. Others might have feared one of the weapons getting out of control, striking her or Ullr. Sif had no such fears; under her tutelage, these men had quickly learned proper handling of sword and spear.

Of course, other ladies of the court might have handed a child, even a newborn, off to a wet nurse. Sif had rejected this idea out of hand, and had been glad when Loki took her side in that argument. There was, he said, no safer place for a prince of Asgard than in Sif’s arms – except maybe if said prince was in Loki’s own arms. Frigga had come up with this length of strong, light cloth which wrapped around Sif’s body and held Ullr secure, and so she took him with her everywhere she went on Asgard.

Her one concession had been her loose-fitting tunic, rather than training leathers or her armor. When they were milk-heavy, her breasts ached, and it was much easier to nudge one side of the tunic off so Ullr could nurse rather than having to find an empty chamber somewhere in the palace and disrobe her top half entire.

In fact, she could feel Ullr beginning to shift a little against her, and a quick mental calculation concluded that he was probably due for another meal. Babes needed to nurse often to grow strong, Frigga had told her. Sif, for her part, cherished the times she got to sit and nurse. Babes became children practically overnight, and War never really ceased, and too soon she knew she would need to leave Ullr to learn and grow on his own.

As if on cue, Loki and his mother appeared out of one of the archways leading into the palace, and when the trainees finished their forms, Sif signaled they should return to a ready position.

“We have no news on when our enemy will return,” she said. “But we know he is coming, and we must be ready. So, too, must we know to respond to commands readily. Come to attention for your King!”

Each trainee – and Arla and Navia, in the front – snapped to attention immediately. Out of the corner of her eye Sif saw Loki’s chin tilt up proudly as he stepped out into the sunlight, inspecting the first few rows of trainees.

“They’ll do,” he said to Sif.

She made a motion with her hand, and the trainees came to rest. Sif told them to pair off and spar, and bade Arla and Navia to go around and practice with some of them. Frigga had moved to a circle of benches in the shade of an awning, and Sif took Loki’s arm and went to join her.

“They’ll be ready,” she told Loki as she sat and shifted Ullr in his swaddlings. “Not that we have much of a choice. Our ranks, and our trainee ranks especially, are wearing thin. There has not been
enough time to recruit and give even the most basic training.”

“It'll have to work.” Loki's brow creased, and Sif could almost see the cogs of his mind turning over information and numbers and strengths and weaknesses, tallying up columns. He would come up with a plan, no doubt, and she would have to change it on the fly. Between the two of them it would get worked out.

She had to believe that.

“You've come from the Vault,” she said, peeking down at Ullr as she shrugged one shoulder of her tunic off and held Ullr up until he latched. “Is it secure?”

“As it will ever be.” Loki sat next to them and pulled the cloth aside with a fingertip, watching his son nurse. “He’s quite greedy.”

“He knows what he needs to be strong.” Frigga sat straight-backed on her bench. “Sif... I know your intentions for what happens if Asgard is attacked. Will you not reconsider?”

“Ullr is safest here,” Sif said, patting the curve of her son under the wrappings, “And I am most dangerous with a sword in my hand and standing in defense, not hiding in a cave with no outlet.” Frigga and Loki shared a look, and Sif narrowed her eyes. “Unless it does have one.”

“Not one that is easily accessible,” Loki muttered. “Or easy at all. But Sif, I—well, I know I cannot stop you. Just promise that you'll make use of the amulet?”

“Yes, yes, Loki, I'll use your thrice-damned amulet. But I hate trying to do anything with that thing activated.”

“I know. It is only meant to buy time, anyway.” But he seemed relieved, and Sif leaned against him slightly to tell him she appreciated the concern. Her own attitudes had shifted now that she'd held their son in her arms; if she'd been fierce in her defense of Asgard, it was now redoubled. Her son had to have a home.

“So. Our army is strained, but it will have to hold; our Vault is probably secure against a mad Titan; and we have not located our little court mole.”

“I have had my handmaidens at work on that last one,” Frigga said. “They are still on their latest pass, but the previous ones have turned up nothing. Either this traitor has been extraordinarily careful, or,” and her face darkened, “One of my attendants has been suborned. Either one is rather vexing to me.”

Betimes, Sif thought, she could see where Loki got many of his mannerisms. “Tell us should you find anything out. Is everything ready for Yule tomorrow? Loki, are you still set on leading the Hunt?”

“Our people must have a sense of continuity,” he began, and gave her a wan smile when Sif glared at him. “My point stands on its own merits; the Hunt is part of Yule, a tradition that goes back before the time of Bor.”

“And the Titan hates that which brings us together,” Frigga added. “I do not agree with holding the Hunt, but I see its necessity.”

For a moment it seemed like the mere mention of Frigga disagreeing with the Hunt would sway Loki, but then he became steel again. Sif looked between them.
“All is in readiness, then,” she said. “For Yule, and for the Titan's attack. Heimdall watches the skies. We can only wait, now.”

She looked down at Ullr, holding him closely and tightly enough to make him break away from his nursing and whimper. “Shh, sorry, little one,” she whispered, and after a moment he latched again, but seemed to only do so to have something in his mouth.

Loki watched all this. “He's already grown,” he said quietly. “Soon he'll be out on the sands with your other two projects.”

“Arla and Navia are growing into capable warriors, I'll have you know.” Sif watched them as they took pointers from a couple of the more advanced trainees. “I think having a cadre of young women trained in more than the rudiments of knife fighting would do them all well. Not everyone can play the games of the court, and if a woman goes into business, it would serve her well to know how to use a sword.”

“As you say.” But in hearing her talk about the future, Sif could see that Loki relaxed. Their hands brushed, and she smiled.

“Shall we have dinner tonight, Lady Frigga?” she asked. “Yule starts tomorrow and Thor and Jane will leave again, and... it may be our last peace for a while.”

“I think that would be lovely. But Sif...”

“I must call you Mother.” Sif felt Ullr shift away, and set about tugging her tunic up under the wrappings. “I will try to remember it.”

“As long as you try.” Frigga rose. “Will you escort me back to my room, my son? An old lady grows lonely for the company of her family.”

They left, and Sif took a moment more before rising and calling her troops to order. No work would be done tomorrow at the least, and she wanted to be sure that they had as much training as she could give them.

*

Her tablet beeped as they were making atmosphere, and it was a frustrating few minutes before Brand could download the full data packet. Alien and Stark tech, and they still had comms blackouts every time they went planetside. When she got it and read the analysis, she carefully tucked her tablet under her arm for the rest of the descent. It was the obvious conclusion, and she was surprised she hadn't drawn it herself. Hopefully the descent to Houston would be quick, because Fury had to hear about this yesterday.

He was waiting on the tarmac when Brand debarked, and when she made to start in he raised a hand and stopped her until they were on the waiting quinjet with the ramp raised and the cockpit sealed off from the back compartment. Only then did Fury take the tablet and pull up the data. She knew when he'd finished, because his eye was wide and his voice was too steady.

“Is this current?”

“As of an hour ago, Director. We've been tracking the region Doctor Foster identified as Sanctuary, apparently. Where this Thanos is based.”

“This happened before.”
“Once. But this time, it’s on a much bigger scale; if Thanos was there, he’s not anymore.” She paused. “We calculated the vector, sir. It’s a cone of probability, but there’s only one place within that cone that we think he’ll be interested in.”

“Let me guess – Asgard.” He scanned the data and swore, stalking up to the cockpit and unsealing it. “Change of plan,” he announced. “Take us to New York City. Stark Tower. Fast as you can push it without pissing anyone off too much, and if they complain, tell them to call me.”

He was already tapping a number in to his phone, and a second later Agent Hill popped up. “Director?”

“Get your team together,” she said. “Shit is about to hit the fan.”

Agent Hill didn't question him, just nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He hung up and was dialing again immediately. Coulson picked up before the first ring had ended. “Coulson.”

“Bring the helicarrier about, take the polar route from wherever you're at in Europe and go into a holding pattern off Manhattan. Retroreflectors at full – we don't want anyone letting Washington know that we're on the move, it'll set off a panic and I don't have all the information yet.”

“Understood, sir. Can you tell me anything?”

“Not on this line. When you're in position, take a quinjet over to Stark Tower. If we're still there. Will update you.”

“Understood. Coulson out.”

Fury was dialing a third time almost before Coulson killed the line. Instead of a face, a cool male voice answered. “You have reached Stark Industries—“

“Don't have time for this, JARVIS. Let Stark know he's got company coming. I'm coming with a friend.”

“Ah, I do not think Mr. Stark will like that—“

“I don't really give a fuck what Mr. Stark likes. Let him know.”

Fury hung up and leaned against the bulkhead, rubbing his head with a gloved hand. “If Asgard is the target here, we're not far behind,” he said. “Tell your people to keep their eyes on the skies, Brand, and tell them to call you if anything leaves Asgard space. We're gonna need all the warning we can get.”

*

The great hall of Gladsheim was hung about with banners and garlands of evergreen. As dusk fell on Yule, and those who had taken part in the Hunt returned, Sif and her retinue stood on the steps to greet them. At the head of the pack were Loki, the great horns of his helm curving up above him and his eyes bright and dancing beneath the golden metal, and Thor, who seemed to glow as bright as the Branches. Clad in crimson, with Ullr swaddled in gold cloth in her arms, Sif descended the stairs (slowly, so she didn't trip) and met them at the bottom.

Loki turned his horse and pulled a fine stag off the back of his saddle, laying it before her. “The Hunt has been fruitful,” he said, letting his voice carry. “Does my lady approve?”
Sif eyed him – a little game they'd played every year, her pretending that she might not, Loki knowing that she would – and then nodded. “I approve,” she said. “Yule will not be a lean time for the realm.”

She motioned for the stag to be taken away to the kitchens – it would be consumed on the longest night of winter – and watched as Jane gave her blessing to Thor's kill as well. They went back up the stairs, Sif and Loki in the lead, and stood before the great hearth in the center of Gladsheim. It was piled high with branches, fragrant and piney, piled atop the great Yule log that would burn for the length of the festival. Loki took Gungnir, and held it out so that Sif could grip it in her hand too as they lowered it to point at the end of the Yule log.

“We are the light of Yggdrasil,” Loki said, the traditional words rolling off his tongue.

“We are the lantern in the winter dark, the fire that will not be quenched.” Sif's voice was clear and loud, ringing to the hall's very rafters, lost high above them. With a push of their will, timed together, they caused Gungnir to fire. White light shot from the spear into the hearth, and within seconds, the wood had caught and flames crackled high. The hall filled with cheering, for Yule was now begun, and Asgard would celebrate.

In a lull between welcoming guests to the feast that night, Loki leaned over and pressed his lips to the sensitive skin behind her ear. Sif shivered, and felt the scrape of his teeth and the cool puff of his breath on her neck.

“The Hunt is still in your blood,” she said, her voice low and husky, and she could tell that he could see the desire in her eyes by the way he grinned at her, all teeth.

“You are in my blood, Sif,” he replied, and the next moment he was all charm again (how he did that she'd never know), accepting congratulations for Ullr's birth.

“Oh, it was all my queen, really. Right, Lady Sif?”

Hoping her eyes were telling him something different now, Sif plastered a smile on her face and hoped that any flush of her skin could be attributed to the peculiar effects of Yule. “I would hope it was,” she said, and shifted Ullr so that she could clasp the hand of Lady Svaltha, who was always a quick wit and had been a friend to her since her coronation, even in those first awful weeks when Sif had no idea what she was doing or what anyone wanted of her. Her husband was not such a constant and indeed opposed Loki in many things, but was more tolerable than others in the court. “Men always seem to want to take credit for things that they had only a little hand in, is that not so, Lady Svaltha?”

“One would hope the hand I had in Ullr was not so little,” Loki muttered, and looked so innocent that even Sif could only roll her eyes.

“Enjoy Yule, Lady Svaltha,” Sif said.


“I have a feeling that this year it will be particularly grand,” Lord Palr added, and after a beat, continued, “With such an auspicious beginning in the birth of our new prince.”

They continued inside, leaving Sif and Loki drained of mirth. But nothing more happened, and in the rush, they agreed they'd talk about it later.

After the feasting and their opening dance, Sif and Loki returned to the high table. Frigga held Ullr in her lap, an arm curled around him as she spoke with some old friends of hers from Vanaheim, and so
Sif took the opportunity to move her chair closer to her husband's, to press her thigh against his under the table. Eir had given her very specific instructions on how long to wait for her body to heal, but that didn't stop Sif from wanting. After so long apart from him, she had her desires. But she was hungry for food as well, and tucked in when the servers brought her a fresh plate. And when Thor and Jane came back from the dancing, and Thor whirled Sif off to the floor she was laughing, and all she felt was light, light.

*

Peter hadn't joined the others in the common area below, staying with the controls even after they'd made hyperjump. Everyone else was down there, talking about how they'd spend their shares of the Asgardian gold and whether or not they could sell the floating containers it came in, considering that they seemed to have antigrav units built in (somewhere) instead of attached external units. More importantly they now had charts for what Peter called Realmspace, and selling copies of those could bring in even more.

But something else was bothering him, and Peter couldn't figure out what.

When he'd talked to Gamora about it, while the others were asleep below and they were cruising through normal space, she'd given him a smirk and said it was his conscience talking to him. He'd protested, saying that Yondu hadn't ever taught him such nonsense. Now, alone with his thoughts and the stars, Peter could admit to himself that maybe she had a point.

Flarkin' Gamora with her flarkin' good points.

Making a disgusted noise, Peter swung his legs round and got out of his chair – only to be thrown back into it as proximity alarms blared and the ship rocked. Huge dark shapes buffeted the Milano, and he grabbed the controls so that they wouldn't be knocked out of the hyperjump channel or shake apart from the force of whatever was passing them. He heard cursing from below, and a few moments after whatever it was had passed them, Drax stuck his head up out of the common area.

"You are trying to kill us, Quill!"

"Wasn't me, big guy!" Peter strapped in and got the ship under control, running diagnostics. "Something passed us, somethin' big. Everyone down there okay?"

He heard Drax shout the question down the ladder and get a chorus of pissed-off responses back. If everyone was pissed, though, that meant that they weren't hurt.

"Everyone is well, Peter Quill." Drax climbed up and sat beside him, watching the lights slowly blink from red to green as diagnostics came back favorable. Peter dropped them out of hyperjump to make sure that everything was okay and to get their bearings. "What was it?"

"Workin' on figuring that out." Peter brought up a new HUD that showed a replay from the ship's camera and ran it back. "Here, this is where... woah!"

He froze the screen just as the rest of the team came up. They all froze when they saw what was on it – gaping metallic jaws, eerie glowing lights along the length of a sinuous, armored body.

"It's those things that attacked Knowhere," Rocket said. "What are they?"

"Where are they going?"

"I am Groot?"
“They were in Thanos' Sanctuary,” Drax said. “They are his army.”

Peter's mouth was suddenly dry. “Guess we might want to go check up on the asshole,” he said. Bringing the ship about, he set hyperjump coordinates, as fast as the Milano could go.

Gamora was gripping the back of his seat so hard Peter could hear the leather creaking. When they reached Sanctuary – a Sanctuary empty of Chitauri, a core where no throne sat now – he heard stitches pop.

“Where d'you think they were headed?” Rocket asked.

Gamora dropped into the navigator's seat. “I think we all know. At top speed and without taking any stops like we did on the way out, we should be able to get to Asgard within a day. Let's hope that's fast enough.”

*

The first night of Yule did not go until dawn, but it was well into the small hours of the morning with the time candles burning past midnight when Sif scooped up Ullr and rose, resting a hand on Loki's shoulder.

“Our son needs his bed, and I grow tired myself,” she murmured in Loki's ear. “Do not be too long in joining me, husband.”

His eyes danced, bright blue in the golden light as he took her hand and kissed it. “I would be a fool to keep you waiting, my lady.”

Warmth curled in her belly, and Sif wondered if Eir's instructions were hard and fast or were only considered guidelines. She indulged herself by letting her fingers trail along the back of Loki's neck as she passed him, leaving the feast hall, and felt the weight of his eyes on her back.

The palace was deserted, and Sif took a longer route up the palace so she could admire the city. Asgard during Yule was one of the most beautiful sights to behold, and even though Ullr was fast asleep, she still spoke to him of it. It would be his to protect one day too, if he chose that path.

She put him to bed, then set about readying the room; cutting and lighting the time candle, laying her gown out so that it could be properly put away in the morning. With a cup of wine in hand, she went to the balcony, leaning on her elbows to watch the Yule fires lit around the city, the stars glittering, caught in the Branches above—

Sif paused, furrowing her brow. There seemed to be something moving, something darting in and out of the Branches. She felt suddenly cold as she walked to the door, wrapping her robe tightly around her.

“Alfarinn,” she said, addressing the Einherjar who answered her knock. “Has Heimdall sent any word?”

“None, Your Majesty. Is everything all right?”

“Send a rider out to him and have him report. It's probably nothing, but I want to be sure.”

“Understood, my lady.”

Sif shut the door, but the cold feeling hadn't gone away. Afraid, she went and pulled Ullr out of his bassinet, holding him close as she paced. Probably nothing, but her bones told her differently.
Heimdall had never regretted being unable to join the feasts at Yule; he preferred the solitude of his post, meditating upon the stars he watched. And with his Sight, he could see revelry all over the Nine Realms; it was as though he was attending every Yule celebration across Yggdrasil. Standing at the open edge of the Observatory, Heimdall widened his Sight, let his eyes relax, and—

*Metal teeth and hungry eyes and snarling faces and behind it all a mad mad grin—*

Heimdall shuddered and turned, running to the central dais and shoving his sword home, activating the Palace's defensive shields.

*Loki felt the floor vibrate under his feet and froze. The conversation and noise in the feast hall faltered, then died altogether as a golden glow filled the room from the outside.

Along with the others he pushed to the edge of the hall, looking out as the palace shield activated. Cold took root in his bones then, and when the first explosion blossomed over the city he felt his fingers go numb.

“My king,” one of the Einherjar assigned to his protection that night whispered. “My king, we need to go – the queen will need—“

“Go see to the safety of the queen and our son,” he ordered. When the Einherji hesitated, Loki turned on him. “Now!”

They scattered, and Thor took their place. “It's him, isn't it,” he murmured. “It's the Titan.”

Loki felt ice down his spine again, and drew in a breath. He couldn't panic now, not here. “Get the guests to safety,” he whispered. “Take them to the lower levels of the palace and send detachments of Einherjar to guard them. Make sure Mother is among them – she'll want to—“

“I will want to stand in the defense of my home.”

Frigga had appeared behind them and was regarding Loki beadily. He tilted his chin up. “Mother, I cannot risk you being hurt.”

“But I can take the risk on my own shoulders.” She smiled a little bit, nudging aside a layer of her skirts to reveal the hilt of a short sword.

_By the Norns, she's as bad as Sif,_ Loki thought to himself. “May I at least have Einherjar accompany you?”

“If my king deems it appropriate, but I will make sure they do not get in the way.” Some of her handmaidens had appeared as well, all of them sporting some kind of weapon which Loki was fairly certain had not been visible before.

“I leave this in your hands, Loki,” Thor said, a bit more loudly and formally than he probably meant to. “The guests... ah, yes.”

“Traitor,” Loki hissed after him, then turned back to face his mother alone. “Your king deems it appropriate. Please, Mother, make sure Sif and Ullr are safe with you when I bring them?”

“I will guard them with my own life. Oh, do not look so worried, my son, I had blooded this blade
long before you were a gleam in my eye. Ladies!

With that, she led the cadre of handmaidens off to do Stars-knew-what, and Loki waited until they were gone before he put his face in his hands, letting himself have a moment of pure panic. His mother was haring off with a group of ladies, his brother was escorting nobles, and Sif and Ullr were somewhere high up in the palace, unprotected, alone. For a moment he let logic go and felt fear.

Slowly, though, Loki packed it away, folded it up into a box in his mind and locked it. He had work to do, and when a squad of Einherjar showed up, he was ready and calm.

“We are going to go secure the safety of the queen and prince,” he told them. “I fear there isn't much time.”

* *

Thanos, standing before his throne, watched as the Chitauri army began laying waste to large areas of the city. Had he come as a conqueror he would have had them subdue the realm without so much damage, but soon enough it wouldn't matter. Half those left alive would be in their Valhalla, if such a place indeed existed.

The palace, though, that would be tougher. The golden shield around it was of an ancient magic, so he couldn't break it as easily as if it had been a construct of the defiant magician-king, but with time it would give way. If his Asgardian friend had done his job...

As if on cue, a swirl of light produced a cloaked figure. “Excellent timing,” the Asgardian said. “I was getting ill, watching that monster put his hands all over the queen, having to look at their whelp...”

Thanos waved a hand. “Enough. Resume your position, and do what you need to do.”

“And then what we discussed—“

“Asgard will be much changed by the time I have what I need from it.” Thanos hoped his smile was as disconcerting as he intended it; sadly, he couldn't tell, with the hood the Asgardian wore. “Now, I believe you have work to do.”

The Asgardian vanished again, and Thanos turned back to watch his army do its work.

* *

Sif didn't have time to try and get her armor on – indeed, her body was not quite back to its pre-pregnancy dimensions, and ill-fitting armor was just as bad as no armor, to her mind – but she'd swiftly put on her leggings and mail shirt and stomped into her boots, and now stood over Ullr's crib buckling her gauntlets. Her shield she'd slung on her back, and her glaive rested against the side of the crib, waiting to be buckled onto her belt alongside a small silver talisman Loki had enchanted for her.

“The women and children will be below,” she said, half to herself. “They will watch over you, Ullr, while I see to the defense of our home.”

She scooped him up, cradling him against her shoulder as she reached for her glaive...and paused, fingers resting on the hilt, as a lone Einherji came into the room. Something pulled at her gut, some unease – Einherjar were trained to only travel in groups in situations like these. For there to only be one...
“What happened to the rest of your squad?” she asked. “Is there fighting in the palace?”

“They were killed,” the Einherji said. He had his sword in hand, and it dripped blood onto the floor. Sif closed her hand around her weapon, her fingers tight in Ullr's blanket.

“There is an incursion, then,” she said. “What level?”

The Einherji raised his sword, grinning at her now as he pointed it at her. “The topmost levels,” he replied. “Nowhere is safe. No one is safe. It is time.”

Sif raised her blade, keeping Ullr as shielded as possible. “Traitor,” she hissed. “So it is you?”

He shook his head. “Oh no,” he replied. “I am a loyal son, wanting only to see Asgard returned to its former glory, to the way it was before an impostor sat on the throne with the whore of the House of Odin at his side, birthing unnatural children—“

Rage rose hot in her belly, and Sif lunged forward. They traded a few blows before the Einherji wisely figured out he was outmatched even though she held Ullr. He backed away and Sif circled round, and as she did she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye – two glowing emerald embers, watching from the shadows. Two eyes, burning with magic.

Loki, she thought, and kept her eyes on the threat before her.

“So someone else pulls your strings, puppet,” she taunted, smirking at the man as she bought time for Loki to do whatever it was he was going to do. “Who is the master?”

“The Mad Titan—“

“Do not be obtuse.” Sif edged closer and the Einherji stepped back – toward the shadows, where Loki waited. She could still see the glimmer of green flitting round, hiding in plain sight. “Who has betrayed us?”

“He is the shadow,” the Einherji said, and for a moment Sif froze, worried that he'd spotted Loki, but relaxed when she realized he hadn't. “He has been working for years to see your stain scrubbed clean from Asgard's histories, and it is all coming to fruition, he is—ah?!”

The Einherji cut off in surprise as a hand wrapped around his shoulders from behind; there was the flash of steel across his throat, and Loki stepped fully out of the shadow, watching dispassionately as the traitorous Einherji bled out on the floor. “So tedious,” he muttered, before reaching out to Sif. His whole expression changed in an instant to fretful, and Sif leaned her cheek into his hand when he touched her, letting him feel that she was warm and alive and there. “Are you all right? Is Ullr?”

“We are fine,” she replied, turning to press her lips to his palm briefly before stepping away, back to business. “How did you know?”

“We came across a group of Einherjar slaughtered in the corridor outside. The squad who accompanied me up here are waiting outside the chamber, and they are none too happy about my coming in here unprotected, so we had best leave here and get you and Ullr to safety—“

“I'm staying with you,” Sif interrupted stubbornly. “Ullr I will give to Lady Frigga, but my place is at your side, Loki.”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “I am glad for it,” he told her. “But Ullr needs you alive.”

“And I need you alive. How am I supposed to be sure you remain that way when,” she gestured to
the dead traitor with her glaive, “We do not know who among our own guards we can trust? Am I supposed to let one of them put a knife in your back?”

Loki seemed prepared to argue, but closed his mouth with a snap. “You'll not go below with the others, will you?”

“Did you truly believe I would?”

“No.” He put a hand on her back and nudged her toward the door. “We'll deliver Ullr to Jane and Mother, and then we will repel this Titan and his army together.”

“As it should be.”

In the corridor they found the bodies of the fallen Einherjar had been laid out side by side, and that either end of the corridor was guarded. The squad snapped to attention when Sif and Loki appeared.

“Orders, Your Majesties?”

“We take the Prince to his grandmother,” Sif replied. “And then we fight for our home.”

*

Thor was able to breathe a little easier when he saw Frigga returning with Jane at her side, Lena clinging to her mother's shoulders. His daughter whimpered and reached for her father when she saw him, and Thor took her, holding her close for as long as he dared.

“I wanna stay with you,” she whined, her fingers scrabbling for purchase on his armor. Thor set Mjolnir down beside him and took her tiny hands in one of his.

“I know, my love, but it's not safe for you to stay with me. When you're big and strong, one day, you can fight at my side, but for now you have to go with your mother and grandmother and be with the others.”

“I don' wanna!”

“I know, I know. Hush, now...” Thor looked at Jane and she tucked herself in against his side too, and for a moment Thor put an arm around her and held his family to him, taking what strength he could. “I'll see you again soon, Lena. But you have to go now.”

He let Jane take their daughter, still whimpering and beginning to cry, down the stairs. Partway down she began screaming, calling out for him, and Thor had to close his eyes and grip Mjolnir's handle hard to keep from running to her. Frigga looked at him with sympathy.

“They'll be safe, my son,” she whispered. “I'll keep them safe.”

“I know.” Thor raised his chin. “You will go below?”

“When Sif brings—ah, here they are.”

In a flash of green light, Loki and Sif appeared in the middle of the corridor. Seeing the knife still in Loki’s hand, Thor raised his eyebrows.

“An Einherji,” Loki replied, icy. “There are traitors in our ranks.”

“Led by someone who knows our plans,” Sif added. Ullr whimpered, waving a fist from his blanket, and she turned away to soothe him, but Thor could see the worry on her face and hear that Ullr
wasn’t believing any of it. His fussing grew louder.

“Do we know…?”

Loki shook his head. “And I cannot think who it might be.”

The palace rocked, and there were faint screams from somewhere far away, toward the city. Frigga stepped forward, holding out her arms for Ullr. For a moment Sif stared at her rebelliously, as though she was going to refuse, but then her face softened and she stepped in close enough to shift Ullr into his grandmother’s arms.

“Keep him safe, please,” she whispered. Thor’s heart twisted.

“With my own life, if I have to.” Frigga pressed her forehead to Sif’s, gave her sons a significant look, and went down the stairs. Sif’s feet shuffled against the floor, as though she’d been about to take a step but kept herself from doing so.

“Close it,” Loki instructed, his voice flat. A slab of flooring slid out and lifted into place, and with the pattern in the floor here, the edges of it were invisible. “We all know the plan, if we cannot repel them?” At their nods, he took a breath. “Thor, you go to the city and help there. Sif?”

“I am with you,” she told him, and slid her shield onto her arm.

They took off toward the front of the palace where fighting was heavy, and Thor watched them until they rounded a corner and were out of sight. The fact that there were traitorous Einherjar was more than worrisome, it threatened to undermine their whole defense.

He threw his hammer and let it pull him in a long arc over the city, and as he did he could see the extent of the incursion. Ground forces were going building to building, dragging people out into the streets before they could reach shelter; all around him, Einherjar in ships fired on the great, slithering beasts that had come with the invasion. They didn’t appear to be doing much good.

He veered off course when he saw that a flight was having trouble. The lead ship was trailing smoke, and the creature they were fighting was bearing down on another, its jaws wide. Thor flipped over in midair and called down the lighting, bolts of blue shooting from Mjolnir into the creature’s gaping mouth. It let out a horrible shriek, electricity crackling along its spines as it writhed in midair. He struck it again, trying to direct the bolts toward its underbelly, but even that was plated and it just seemed to enrage the creature. When it roared, though, one of the gunners fired a volley of shots into its mouth, and it let out one last high-pitched whine and dropped from the sky.

The Einherjar on the ships cheered and waved him on, and Thor made himself leave again. He couldn’t stop and question each and every Einherji, not when they were in the middle of a pitched battle. If they tried to kill him, he reasoned, they were traitors, and he would deal with them. Hopefully those who were loyal would outnumber those who weren’t.

* 

Someone already had Gylfi saddled by the time she reached the courtyard, and as she was mounting up she saw them putting Loki’s saddle on his mare. She danced, tossing her mane and swinging her hindquarters around nervously until Loki caught her reins and murmured something, stroking his fingers along her neck. She calmed, and he tightened her girth himself before swinging up into the saddle.

“Would that you could use that trick on the nerves of our soldiers,” she said quietly to him when he used his leg to nudge their horses together. “They all look deathly afraid.”
“Death’s herald has come to our doorstep,” Loki replied. He took his reins in hand, eyes forward, jaw set. “But he is not welcome.”

Sif grinned. This Loki, this one who was so willing to join a fight, he did not come out often. When he did, though, it was glorious to see. Her fear draining away for a moment, she reached over and took his hand off the reins, lacing their fingers.

“Then we go together and get him gone,” she whispered. His teeth gleamed in the light when he answered her grin with one of his own, and when she released his hand they galloped out of the courtyard, the thunder of hooves behind them.

It was pitched from the moment they rounded the corner, and though Sif could always see her husband in the mess of Chitauri attackers and fighting Einherjar, they drifted apart and then back together. Gylfi was trained in what to do, and with his ears flat back he struck out with hoof and teeth, trampling any of the invaders she cut down with her blade. He reared at a cue from her legs, getting her out of the range of a questing knife, and then struck out with a forehoof. Sif brought him over above the creature and extended her glaive over its heart, the blade stabbing directly through. Loki, she saw, was faring just as well. His mare was calm even as he threw spell after spell from his hands, steering her only with his legs. It was a beautiful, deadly thing to watch; whenever one managed to get close he’d either slam a killing spell down into its body, or one of his little knives would do the job, flashing silver before coming away dripping with gore.

He spun his horse on her haunches, caught Sif’s gaze—then his eyes went wide. “Sif, down!”

She didn’t have time. Instinctively Sif brought her shield up to try and block the incoming blast from one of the Chitauri’s weapons, and when she did she felt the shield grow warm for a moment. The blast harmlessly dissipated, wisps of light trailing out in a corona around her, and when she tilted her shield to see if it was damaged she saw a glyph worked into the edging glowing faintly. She turned her shield to Loki, who refused to look even a little bit bashful as he jerked his head for them to move on, toward the heaviest fighting at the very base of the shield.

“Unfair advantage,” she muttered, but heeled Gylfi after him.

They galloped through the carefully manicured gardens, and as their horses’ shoes tore up the lawn she hoped that the gardeners wouldn’t be too upset about it, and then wondered at herself for such a ridiculous thought.

The fighting on the parade grounds was thick, and their progress slowed as they drove their horses in. They were separated again fairly quickly, and that was why Sif was far away, much too far away, when she saw Loki get unhorsed.

A wordless scream tore itself from her throat, and without thought or plan she drove Gylfi forward, shoving aside friend and foe alike and fighting to get to him. His mare had bolted, getting herself out of danger, but in the press she couldn’t see Loki and feared having trampled him until a bubble of green light burst in front of her, and she nearly wept with relief.

“Are you all right?” she asked, circling Gylfi to keep the area around him clear. Loki was scowling, glaring around at every Chitauri nearby. That was all the answer Sif needed. When he looked petulant, it was more due to his own idiocy than anyone else’s.

“Always good to know my lady wife cares so much about me,” he said.

“You’re all right, then,” she told herself. “When you get short, you’re all right.”
“I’m *never* short, Sif.” With that he waded off into the fray, flashes of green and silver following.

Sif nearly dismounted, thoughts of an Einherji knife in his back haunting her, but then one of her calvarymen let out a cry, and the screams of horses brought her back, and Sif took off to hound a group of Chitauri that had pinned some riders and now-riderless horses against a wall.

When they were taken care of she trotted Gylfi up the steps before the palace, letting him breathe and surveying the field. Loki was easily visible, a wraith darting hither and yon, his clones flashing in and out of existence as quickly as he could conjure them. A group of Einherjar stayed with him, their swords flashing as they protected their king, but it wouldn’t have mattered if they weren’t there. Loki was a force unto himself, and for a moment, Sif let herself just *look*.

Something moved in the corner of her eye, though, and it took her a moment to track it. When she looked, she couldn’t see anything, and wasn’t sure what she had seen to begin with. A shadow? A person, slipping back into the palace? The only people behind her were more ranks of Einherjar, and a cluster of others – she saw Arla and Navia, having blatantly disobeyed her direction to go down to the caverns with the others, and some of her other officers.

It took her a moment to realize who was missing.

Something cold gripped her heart as she turned Gylfi and trotted him up the rest of the steps and right into the entryway, his shoes ringing on the stone. “Where is Edwik?” she asked Arla when the girl came to her side to see what she needed.

“I... I don’t know, my lady,” Arla replied, brow furrowed. “I have not seen him since the shields went up. Navia?”

“Nor I, Queen Sif.”

“Has anyone seen Edwik?” she called out. “Has anyone word of where he might be engaged?”

Some of the officers exchanged looks. “My queen,” one of them—Ylvar, she remembered, one who had always had a little more respect for her abilities in the yard before she’d proven herself—answered, “We’re from Edwik’s battalion. We sent most of those below us out to where the fighting seemed the fiercest and to rescue citizens, but we did so without orders from our commander. He has not yet been seen.”

“Has he been captured?” Sif asked, but she knew the answer already. Edwik was too old and canny to let himself be captured so soon after an engagement... he was...

He was standing on the dais where Gungnir had been resting, and he was pointing the tip of the spear at her.

“Run!” she cried, as her vision filled with golden light.

*

The sounds of the battle were muffled here, far below in the bedrock of the realm. There were distant booms, and sometimes dust sifted down onto their heads, but for the most part there was little hear but the rustle of their own passage, through the ways which water had carved out of rock for thousands of years.

“I’ve never been this far down,” Jane said quietly. Lena had finally fallen asleep in her arms, and so had Ullr, nestled in his blanket against Frigga’s shoulder.
“Most Asgardians do not even know this place exists.” Frigga stepped deftly over a small rivulet in the path, her skirts not even brushing the surface of the cloudy water. “It’s meant as a place of refuge, in times of great trouble. Some think that the well of the Norns is here, in the roots of the realm. They’re mistake, though. It’s elsewhere.”

They were at the head of the column of women, children, and others who couldn’t fight or wouldn’t fight, leading the way deeper into the cave system. To Jane’s thinking it shouldn’t have extended so far; Asgard was a finite space, but she shelved that thought for the moment before it spiraled off into quantum entanglement and multiple universes and concentrated on keeping Lena sleeping. She’d fussed about her father for a long time. Jane couldn’t blame her.

“So… are we going somewhere, or…?”

Frigga hesitated, and Jane steeled herself for the inevitable, brain-bending answer. “Yes,” the old queen said at last. “I hope.”

“You hope?”

“There… is a way out of these caves. Loki knew of it, when he began his travels around the realms, and so he roped Thor and the others into going with him, but… I do not like it. I never mastered that magic as well as he did.”

“What is it, some kind of…”

“It’s a portal, Jane. It’s… oh, it’s difficult to explain. You have traveled the shadowed paths with Loki?”

“A few times, yeah.”

“This way is like that, only anchored to the spot. It is old magic, as old as the realm. I suppose on your world you’d think of it like a small wormhole.”

Jane opened her mouth to argue that, but decided against it.

“So this… place. How are we supposed to use it?”

“I will hold the way as long as I can. You will have to guide them through.”

“Me? Wait, me?”

“I will give you something to help you, but yes, Jane.” Frigga paused, stepping to the side to allow others to go by them. “You may not have chosen our longevity, but you are a Princess of this realm, and that has afforded you certain powers. You may not be aware of them, but you have them just the same. More than that, these people, our people, they know you to be wise and kind and one of their leaders. They will look to you for guidance, and you must be able to give it.”

There was little of the kindly, grandmotherly woman that Jane knew; this was Frigga the Queen, and Jane could only swallow and nod. “I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

“I know you will.” Frigga stepped into the flow of people again. “I know.”

* 

“My lord! My lo—it’s the Queen!”

Loki slammed a knife into the throat of the Chitauri he’d been fighting and threw up a wall of
flickering green magic. There weren’t many Chitauri left inside the palace shield, but there were enough to make him take precautions.

“What about the Queen?” he demanded, striding over. “What about her?”

The Einherji seemed to quiver a moment, then find his pride. “She’s dead,” he announced. “Our leader has taken Gungnir. He asks that you come quietly to him for judgment.”

For a terrible moment Loki almost believed the traitorous Einherji. But this close to Sif, with their bond newly reinforced, newly reforged, he could feel the strength of her life, and he knew it to be a lie.

“I am the King of Asgard,” he said, fingers twitching by his sides. “And I will not be ordered about by you.”

The Einherji lunged forward with his sword but Loki had already switched places with one of his clones and attacked from behind, driving a dagger in between the man’s shoulder blades and down into his heart. He crumpled, and Loki yanked the dagger out (it had been a gift from Sif and he wouldn’t let it rust in the bones of a traitor) and spun, looking up at the palace just as golden light flashed in between the pillars of the entrance.

* 

Sif brought her shield up, hoping that the glyph that had saved her before would at least make it so that she emerged from this less wounded, hoping that Loki had come up with something that might counter the ancient magic of Gungnir. But the pain never came, and Sif looked above the top edge of her shield.

“Colonel Danvers?” she said, surprised. “I thought you had left—“

“Nah, I like it here. Well, I did, before these shitty guests arrived.” Carol ground her teeth and held her hands out before her. It seemed like she was pulling the energy in through her palms, the skin reddened when Edwik let up and raised Gungnir’s tip. Carol’s hands glowed again and she fired energy back at him, but he touched something at his belt and vanished, the energy instead blasting a hole in the wall clear through to the next corridor.

“Damn it,” Carol muttered. “How’d he do that?”

“I would like to know myself.” Sif dismounted, extending her glaive fully.

“He has the favor of the Titan,” one of Edwik’s lieutenants said, and charged. Sif made ready to attack, but Carol stepped in. Her fist connected solidly with the man’s face and he stumbled back, and some other Einherjar stepped in to subdue him. Swords were drawn, shields were raised, and Sif felt a moment of despair. If they had traitors in their own ranks, how would they know who to trust? How would they know if the Einherji they crossed blades with was truly loyal?

One of the lieutenants dropped his weapons and raised his hands, but the other two surged forward and were quickly subdued. “What do we do with them, my Queen?” one asked.

She felt the twang behind her heart, Loki plucking on their bond to make sure she was on the other end of it, then it went still. He was there, of course, but distracted from whatever he’d been trying to tell her or ask her. Very well, she’d do it on her own.

Tilting her chin up, Sif clipped her shield to her back and walked over, collapsing her glaive again as she did. Nudging the first one, the one who’d attacked her, with a boot, she used the flat of her blade
to lift his face, make him look her in the eye.

“Why did he betray us?” she asked, her voice surprisingly calm.

“Because Asgard should have an Asgardian on its throne,” the lieutenant spat. “Not a monster. Not a frost giant.”

“Loki is of Asgard.” Sif thought for a moment she’d become as skilled at bending the truth as Loki, and let herself be pleased. “Gungnir would not have accepted him otherwise. The old magic would not have accepted him otherwise.”

“Magic can be fooled, especially by one skilled in its use. And now he’s brought you down with him, making you bear his,” the Einherji spat on her boot, glaring up at her after he’d done so, “Unnatural bastard—”

Without hesitation, Sif stepped to the side, brought her sword up, and cut off his head.

The hall was still, silent. Forcing her hands not to shake, Sif moved to the next lieutenant. “What is he planning to do?”

“Give the Titan what he wants.” This one seemed much more willing to cooperate suddenly. His eyes kept flicking to the body beside him.

“What is that?”

“I, I don’t know, my lady, truly—“

“You call me Queen Sif?” she told him, her voice rising. “Your actions and the actions of your captain have put this entire realm and all its citizens in danger. Is that what you wanted?”

“No! I swear it, Queen Sif, it is not!” The man was almost in tears. “We wanted Asgard under a true Asgardian king, and Edwik, he said that the Titan had promised him aid in exchange for something we had here—“

“What? What did he want?”

“Was it the gauntlet?”

Sif turned. Loki’s battle gear was smeared with gore, his skin marked with scorches and small cuts, but his eyes were clear and steady. He stepped forward beside her, one of his hands resting briefly on her arm. It calmed her, and she took a half-step to the side to let him have more room.

“Was it the gauntlet, or the cube?” Loki asked. His voice was calm, quiet. The lieutenant became noticeably paler.

“B-both, my lord, uh, my King,” he stammered. “The cube to give him power, the gauntlet to control all the Stones, it would make him a god, it would make him unstoppable.”

“Perhaps. But the Titan couldn’t enter the Vault.”

“But Edwik could. And, and he could bring down the palace shield.”

Sif felt the twang behind her heart again, and this time was not at all sure the fear flooding in was Loki’s or her own. “We have to stop him,” she said to Loki, turning away so they could include Carol. “If the palace shield comes down then everyone still inside could die.”
Loki picked at his palm, thinking. “I will go to the shield generator room,” he said, letting his hands fall. “If he has done anything to it I can most likely repair or shore it up. Sif, I need you to lead our loyal forces. The… the traitors are turning on their fellows, outside. Those who are with us need to see you.” At her nod, she felt him slip his fingers against her hand, gentle, even as his voice was commanding. “Colonel Danvers, I advise you to rid yourself of some that excess energy before you burst.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You’re luminous.”

“Got yourself a sweet talker there, Queen Sif.” Carol sketched them a salute, then took off into the air and out into the open.

“What do we do with these?” one of the Einherjar asked. The lieutenant who had talked, and the one who hadn’t, both looked up in alarm. Loki considered them both dispassionately, then made a sharp gesture with his hand. Both men crumpled.

“Traitors cannot be suffered to live,” he said, and vanished in a flash of green light.

Sif closed her eyes, taking three deep breaths. They were traitors, she told herself, and tried to forget that she’d known them when she was much younger and training on the sands.

“Come on!” she called to the remaining Einherjar, all of whom looked pale and afraid. “Arla, Navia, sweep the palace. Get anyone who’s remained behind to leave through one of the tunnels and take them into the mountains, take shelter. If we repel the Titan I’ll send for you, but if not…”

“We’ll take care of them, my lady,” Arla said proudly. Sif took her by the shoulders and pressed their foreheads together briefly.

“Go, and fear no darkness,” she said. She did the same with Navia, stroking the girl’s hair, then stepped back, leading the column of Einherjar that had formed up behind her back out into the fray.

*

Jane stared at the cleft in the rock. “We’re all supposed to go through that?”

Frigga handed Ullr off to one of her handmaidens. “Yes, we are going to go through that. It is not what it appears, remember.”

Jane turned to give the rock formation another look. If she turned her head a little, the light caught the crystals in a strange way, making them gleam faint green… but there weren’t crystals elsewhere in the cave, it had all been bare stone…

“How am I supposed to lead everyone through this?”

Frigga was searching through a small bag she’d brought out from inside her skirts. Reaching in—up to her elbow—she pulled out a necklace, a green stone set in gold and hanging on a black leather cord. “This will be a kind of beacon for those who come after you. I have walked this path myself, it will lead you to Midgard, and there is a waypoint. Loki’s method cuts out the actual walking, but this way, the old way, it will work in your favor. You go through first, and the others will see the light of your beacon and come to it. Do not leave the path it illuminates, and do not listen to the darkness. You will be able to see the end coming. Walk through without fear, even though it will be strange to you.
Jane swallowed, but took the necklace and put it around her neck. The metal was warm against her skin. “I’ll do my best.”

Frigga softened for a moment, and she took Jane’s face in her hands. “My son was lucky to find you,” she said quietly. “You are very brave, Lady Jane. Now, be ready.”

She stepped away, spreading her hands, and green sparks flew from her palms into the rock. The crystals glowed, then glowed brighter as Frigga poured more power into them, her eyes luminous in the dim light. And then the cleft in the rock yawned wide, glowing green at the edges and completely black inside.

“Go,” Frigga instructed. She sounded a little strained, but strong. “Go now, Jane!”

Without hesitation Jane stepped forward, hesitated a moment, then gripped Lena tightly and stepped into the glowing portal.

*

The palace shield generator room was in the heart of the palace, protected. When it was activated the shield’s magic would spread through the palace itself and out through the tallest tower, flowing through the ancient building and lending strength to the walls as well as shielding the whole grounds.

Loki had studied this magic, something set up by those who built the palace. He knew what to do to activate it, and he knew that dropping something emanating destructive magical energy, as Edwik currently was, would certainly disable the shield.

“Oh good, you’re here.” Edwik was looking at him through the glowing golden energy of the shield generator, his graying hair whipping around. “I won’t have to hunt you down.”

He had been holding it together until then, but now Loki began to shake—not from being overwhelmed, but from rage, pure and unadulterated. For years, for centuries, Edwik had been by his side. Loki had taken his presence as a comfort, as evidence that perhaps not everyone in Asgard had written him off completely. Having that foundation taken away had rattled him, but it was the blatant betrayal that stoked his wrath. He had trusted this man, and now he and his family were in danger as a consequence of that trust.

“I can understand not wanting a frost giant on the throne of Asgard,” Loki said. “But all the others? For someone who purports to want to put Asgardians first, you’ve found a truly inefficient way to go about it.”

“Still your tongue, boy,” Edwik snapped. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“You’ve fooled everyone, you know. You’ve made them all think that you’re the good king, the dutiful leader. They need to see how you’ve hurt them, made them soft.”

“So you brought Thanos into it? You couldn’t think of a less catastrophic way?”

“I couldn’t very well stop you myself, could I?”

Loki edged forward, trying to move slowly so Edwik wouldn’t spook and drop the destructive talisman he was holding into the generator. “Actually, given that you were one of the few people I’ve trusted most of my life, you could have. At any time.”
“I didn’t think it would ever come to you actually sitting on the throne, holding Gungnir. The Allfather’s plan was to produce you in Jotunheim after Thor’s coronation. You would have been back in that icy hell where he took you from, back where you belonged, and not here sullying one of our own.”

He had to stop, to take a breath, not rise to the bait about Sif. She was one Loki would trust to his dying breath, and Edwik’s words were empty. “You knew I was from Jotunheim?”

“I saw the Allfather pluck you from the snow, saw him bewitched by you—“

“I don’t think my father is so feeble as to be ensorcelled by an infant, but as you say—“

“And he let you stay, he adopted you into his family, and you’ve been a blight on Asgard ever since. Don’t move.” Loki froze where he stood, and Edwik watched him until he could be sure Loki wasn’t still moving. “What it needs is a cleansing. Thanos agreed to sweep your stain off the realm, and all I had to do was give him that which has been gathering dust in the Vault for generations.”

“And in so doing you’ve doomed us all. You do realize that, right? Thanos is not going to honor his agreement with you.”

“He’s been quite helpful so far. As have you.” Edwik’s arm twitched, and his cloak shifted to reveal several small talismans. Loki recognized them; they’d been gifts, after all, from him to Edwik, tokens of friendship and respect. He felt sick. “Thanos has helped me stir up beings in the Realms from muttering in taverns to action, to rebellion.”

“To keep us distracted.”

“Just so. To keep you and your filthy human friends off my scent. And now...” Edwik raised his hand high, and the thing he held gleamed malevolently in the golden light. “Now, I will reap the benefits.”

Desperate, Loki sent a jet of green light out as Edwik dropped the talisman, hoping to knock it away, but his magic was repelled by the shield energy and bounced back toward him. Loki ducked for cover behind the heavy golden door and it was that which saved him. The talisman ignited in the heart of the shield mechanism, and through the crack between the door and the rest of the room, Loki was able to watch Edwik bring his cloak up to block the backwash and then, with a glimmer of magic, vanish.

The shield generator shuddered to a halt, red light suffusing through the gold energy until the generator crumbled apart, and the gold light dissipated, and the room went dark. Loki waited for a long moment after that, the only sounds the faint noise of battle outside and the thudding of his own heart, before he slid out of his hiding spot. The shield mechanism was completely destroyed, and there was no way for even his magic to repair it.

We are lost, he thought, and pulled the shadows down around him.

*  

Cries went up from around Thor. “The palace!” the Einherjar were shouting, despair in their voices. “The shields are falling!”

He turned, and watched in horror as the golden light surrounding the fluted towers flickered and failed, and faintly heard the animal roars of the Chitauri as they realized their path was now clear. The creatures overhead began moving in.
“Prince Thor,” someone near him asked, their voice shaking. “What do we do?”

*

Thanos watched as the shield fell, and a moment later Edwik appeared on his throne platform. His hood was down, and his cloak smoked, but he bowed deeply even so.

“The way is clear,” he said. “Asgard awaits you.”

“You’ve done well.” Thanos made a motion with his hand, and his platform along with the rest of his forces began moving in. “The Vault?”

“It should be clear for your entry.”

“Then that is where I will go first, to make sure that the Tesseract and the Gauntlet are secured. After eliminating our mutual threat, of course.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Edwik said, bowing deeper. “Asgard will thank you for this.”

“I’m sure it will.”

As the palace rose in front of him, Thanos felt elated. At long last, he would have all the power he needed. At long last, he would be able to show himself worthy.

*

Frigga felt the failure of the shields, deep below the palace. She couldn’t afford to let herself feel fear, however, and held her position and power steady as more people filed past her.

*Stars help them*, she prayed. *Stars and Branches, protect them.*

*

Sif froze, watching as the shield keeping a writhing horde of Chitauri back suddenly vanished. There was a beat where nobody, Chitauri or Einherjar, moved. Then one of the Chitauri raised its weapon and let out a Branch-shaking shriek, and charged.

For a split-second, Sif almost ordered everyone to stand with her, to form a line and hold them off to the last drop of their blood, but just as quickly it was gone and she cried out, “Fall back! Fall back to the palace!” The entryway would, she thought, be more easily defended, and it would give Arla and Navia time to get anyone trapped in the palace down to the caverns or out of the palace, hopefully to escape.

The main entry hall was utter chaos when they reached it. Groups of people who had been in the higher levels were streaming down the stairs, making for one of the access points to the caverns; Einherjar were running about, moving up to gunner positions or down to join her forces. Sif organized everyone as best she could, and as the guns above rained down on the encroaching horde, she collapsed her glaive again, strapping her shield to her arm.

“Hold the line!” she shouted, and heard those words repeated by any officers that were with the group. “Hold!”

The Chitauri thundered across the parade ground and up the steps, and Sif gripped her sword tight and set herself, trying not to let it show that she knew this was just stalling for time, stalling until they could get as many people off Asgard as possible.
The wave hit and she let her training take over, blocking and ducking, kicking bodies out of the way so that she could strike at the next attacker behind them. All around her Einherjar fell, and the screams of the wounded and dying filled her ears. She blocked them out as best she could, holding her place in the line, until a flickering wall of green went up in front of them and she turned and saw Loki beside her.

“Valiant Sif, always at the head of the attack,” he said. His grin was shaky, his eyes tired, but her heart still lifted to see him. The Einherjar with her seemed to appreciate the respite too.

“Loki,” she whispered, realizing for the first time that her throat was dry and full of ash, her tongue thick. She jerked her head toward the back of the room and he anchored the spell and followed her. Sif noted with approval that the Einherjar around where she’d been standing moved in, filling in the gap without hesitation.

He found a waterskin somewhere and handed it to her. The water was tepid but she slurped it down greedily, feeling a thousand tiny scrapes and cuts suddenly and keenly. “Loki, we cannot hold them, even here,” she said warily. “And the city… Thor is out there, and I have not had word…”

“He’s all right.” Loki seemed about to say something, then stopped, looking lost. “Sif… Sif, I think we have to leave. We cannot push them back with brute strength. Our shield is gone, our forces turn on each other… I cannot think of a way out of this.”

“No,” Sif whispered. Then, more strongly, “No, there has to be another way—”

“Half our forces—our *loyal* forces—are wounded or dead, traitors are everywhere picking off those not on their side, the Chitauri are relentless—”

“We get some of the guests, show them how to man the guns—”

“Sif, if we stay, *we will die*. You will die, and I cannot—Sif, I can’t—”

He sounded so young and scared, and though her stomach flipped over unpleasantly, she could see the truth of his words. They had retreated so far, where else could they go? Up, into the palace to die like mice in a trap? Down into the caverns, to die there? She thought of Ullr, down below, and Jane, and Thor, and Loki, and drew a shaky breath.

“As long as we come back,” she said, and gripped Loki’s face in her hands. “We come back, Loki, we take back our home. We retreat, rest, and we *come home*.”

* 

The evacuation was as fast a process as they could make it. Loki’s shield fell, but by then Sif was back at the front, defending for as long as she could. Loki took Arla and some of the others who couldn’t fight and deposited them far out into the mountains behind the city, into a hunting lodge that had been volunteered by one of the nobles in the group as a second base. It wasn’t connected to the royal family, so hopefully it would be initially overlooked. By the fifth trip he was looking drained, but when Sif rotated back and let fresher blades fight, he waved away her concerns.

She was one of the last ones out. They’d fallen back to one of the corridors, and the Chitauri were banging down the doors, the heavy golden leaves rattling with every hit. Sif had just given her blessing to one of the Einherjar who had volunteered to stay behind, to protect their retreat.

“We’re sworn to protect you, my lady, and you, my king,” he said, kneeling before them both. “I took that oath and I stand by it.”
Sif took his face in her palms and kissed his brow as she had with the others, and stepped back as he ran forward, bravely drawing his sword and holding his shield before him. Loki reached over and gripped her hand hard.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “We are doing the right thing?”

Sif stared hard at the backs of the Einherjar protecting them, giving their lives, and committed the name of each one to memory. When they returned, she would light the funeral boat for each one of them herself. “We are doing the only thing we can,” she replied, and squeezed his hand.

The doors creaked, bending inward, and Sif closed her eyes. She felt the tickle of magic against her skin, and when she opened her eyes again, she was in the middle of Central Park, in New York City, and she was alone.

*

Loki reappeared on Asgard in between two shops, near to where he knew Thor had been fighting. The streets were slick with Chitauri gore and blood and other, worse things, and as he picked his way through rubble and bodies, he saw telltale signs—scorch marks, cracks radiating out from a point of impact.

A few streets over, he heard the crackle of electricity, and pulled the shadows around him again. It didn’t quite hurt, not yet, but he was tired, and forced himself to concentrate to come out in the right place.

Thor spun, raised Mjolnir, then lowered it when he saw it was Loki. “Brother? Loki?”

“The palace is fallen,” Loki said. “I’m here to get you and take you to safety. Get anyone else you can together.”

All told, it was a small group—himself, Thor, and eight Einherjar—but Loki surveyed them, gathering as much strength as he could for as long as he could. “Everyone, keep a tight hold,” he said, and took a fistful of Thor’s cape.

*Once more, he told himself, pulling the shadows down around them. Just once more.*

*

The Chitauri fanned out through the palace, going room to room, gathering anyone they found in hiding and bringing them down to the throne room. Some, they killed. Most they didn’t, forcing them to sit on the risers to either side of the throne and the aisle to it, and wait.

They found the entrance to the caverns. It wasn’t a lucky guess; Edwik had told Thanos of the caverns, and Thanos had told the Chitauri, and so when they found it they pursued the few men and women they encountered toward the back of the caverns.

They found Frigga, standing in front of a cleft in the rock that seemed to end a few feet back. Her hands were clasped in front of her skirts, and her eyes were steel, and she said not a word as they brought her to the throne room and made her kneel before the throne itself.

Thanos came.

When he stood in the doorway, taking up most of the space, the entire assembly fell silent. Edwik stood beside him, Gungnir clasped in his hand. Oddly he’d folded a piece of cloth between his skin and the shaft, as though he couldn’t touch it directly.
Frigga saw this, and smirked. Most didn’t see it, and despaired.

Thanos paused by the old queen, kneeling before the throne. “I’ve heard of you,” he said. “Frigga, former queen.”

“I rule in the absence of my sons and husband,” she said, her voice clear and strong. Thanos laughed.

“Not anymore.”

He took the steps up to the throne. With his great size, the throne seemed small, but Thanos sat upon it easily, his hands resting along the arms. He smiled, and it was a great and terrible thing to see.

“Asgard has a new king,” he said. “And there’s something he wants very badly.”

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