The Writing On The Wall

by stalrua

Summary

Eating the apple Loki gave her seemed harmless. At least, until Jane realized the consequences.

Can a mortal come to terms with immortality as she lives through the ages? And is an eternity long enough for a god to escape what's been foretold within the pages of an ancient book?

There's a fine line between an act of mischief and an act of fate.
Prologue

“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

2012: New York City, United States

"Stop!"

Jane pushed harder, lungs burning with breaths that had turned from heavy to gasping and muscles aching from their continued sprint up the stairs. Rounding a corner, she took a moment to peek over the railing into the depths of the stairwell to see the agents trailing her a few flights below. One of them leaned out, and Jane saw her face reflected in the mirrored lenses before she took off once more.

"Come back!"

As if that was going to happen. Did Agent Hartmann think she'd decided to fight him and his men off and climb twelve stories for the fun of it? No, turning back wasn't an option. She had to reach the rooftop. She had to find Loki. If she were to surrender now, they would only proceed to haul her off to Norway.

"Jane, we have to get you out of here!"

Case in point.

Skidding around the last corner, she clambered the last few steps to the rooftop access, threw open the heavy door, and emerged into blinding sunlight, fresh air, and the sound of war. The door slammed shut behind her with a thud that would've been loud were it not for the deadly symphony that occupied the air. Alien and military aircrafts flew overhead, filling the sky with bullets and – were those energy blasts? – that occasionally hit their mark but, more often than not, rained down on buildings and the unsuspecting populace below.

And even though the agents were growing closer, Jane froze for a moment to stare with wide eyes and a slack jaw at the destruction, the sheer devastation that had fallen over the city.

Suddenly, a muffled shout sounded from behind the door, breaking through her immobility and spurring her into action once more. She scanned the rooftop. Smooth concrete, air conditioning units, a small utility structure… nothing that she needed. But then she noticed a jagged strip of metal to the left. Her legs were shaky, unused to the flat surface after the climb, but she forced cooperation from them as she stumbled forward.

With no time to spare, she drug the weighty panel – judging by the half-scorched imprint of a flag at the far end, it was the last remnant of a fighter jet that had recently been shot down – back to the rooftop access. The yelling was growing louder, too close for her to do any more than wince and readjust her grip when the keen edge of the metal sliced open her palm.

It wasn't until the panel was wedged beneath the door handle and braced against the ground that she finally allowed herself a deep breath. Her heart continued to race, but the rest of her muscles
dissolved into mush, begged for a reprieve. Wearily, she collapsed against the door and let her head fall back before sliding to the ground.

The pounding of the agents' fists vibrated through her back.

"Open the door, Jane!"

She numbly watched the battle taking place in the sky.

"You need to come with us!"

Her hand stung, felt sticky with blood.

"It's not safe!"

But really, what was safe anymore?

Safe was a straw cot and a heavy wool blanket, listening to the winter wind's fierce howling while being warmed by a fire in the hearth, staring at the comforting crosshatch overhead. It was snowballs and laughter, noses red from the cold, mouths stretched wide in grins, white powder dusting hair and collecting on eyelashes. It was big band jazz, painted lips and kohl-dark eyes, short dresses, long nights, the taste of tobacco and moonshine and rebellion in the air.

Safe was firm muscles and the hard press of fingers, the scent of cedar and frost, breathless moans and quiet whispers, mischievous smirks, the shiver of magic, fingers brushing across cheekbones and through hair, the color green in an endless world of grey.

Jane sighed. Those forms of safety were long gone. Now the things she'd once considered a haven of sorts had been cast aside, the harsh reality of the world replacing them with things that were decidedly unsafe.

Because safe was not the iron scent of blood on the air, blank and glassy eyes atop a grimace, sickness, rape, bile and excrement, prison bars, mushroom clouds, radiation, buildings crumbling into dust, anger and hate and death.

It wasn't a wormhole that allowed an alien force to bear down upon Manhattan at the behest of a god.

It wasn't an antechamber in a land of ice, blue flames highlighting an ancient evil.

It wasn't waking up in a hospital alone.

A whirring aircraft passed a little too close for comfort, effectively scattering Jane's thoughts and sending her scrambling around the structure concealing the staircase to hide in the shadows. There, she watched as the machine continued onward, closely followed by a silver and red blur. A silver and red… wait.

"Thor!" Leaping up, she sprinted to the edge of the building. "Thor!"

Jane screamed his name over and over again until her voice cracked with the strain. However, her efforts were in vain. The cacophony of battle swallowed everything, and she was forced to watch as Thor continued in the opposite direction, ultimately landing on the spire that adorned the top of the Chrysler Building.

Defeat welled up unbidden. It had been a fool's plan at best, but it was still better than running away.
In the end, though, there was no other word for it. She'd failed. And now she was alone. Alone and stranded on a high-rise with no way of finding the one person that could definitively end what was happening.

Out in the open, the wind whipped madly, yanking her hair to the point the strands left stinging lashes across her face and neck. The tangled mess obscured much of the view, but nothing could block the whale-like creatures passing through the hole above Stark Tower.

Jane was still clinging to the ledge when everything exploded.

The blast of energy from the passing alien cruiser shattered the concrete beneath her, and she could no longer discern between sky and ground as the force of the explosion flung her through the air like a rag doll.

Time seemed to slow.

It would be just her luck that she'd fly over the edge of the building. Would the fall be as terrifying as she imagined? Was instantaneous death painless? Who would be the one to identify her splattered remains? What if they couldn't identify her at all? She'd be just another nameless victim lumped in with the other unidentifiable casualties of the battle, and the people closest to her would never know the circumstances of her death, would be forced to mourn a body-less casket and an empty grave. Of course, that was assuming they even defeated the aliens.

Time sped up again.

Jane landed heavily against an air conditioning unit. Broken pieces of concrete jabbed into her back and her leg was bent beneath her at an unnatural angle, but there was little she could do except try to remember how to breathe as dust and debris settled around her. It took a considerable amount of effort before the sweet rush of oxygen filled her lungs… only for it to end in a harsh gasp.

Her lungs were on fire, or was that her chest itself?

Her muscles?

Her bones?

Her heart?

Pain was a knife swimming through her veins. It was all she could focus on, the intensity of it sending black spots dancing across her sight. She needed to breathe, but right then she needed to move more. Because it was the concrete beneath her causing so much pain, right? Surely, she'd be able to breathe easier without the jagged edges digging into her back.

Jane wiggled her fingers first as a test and, at the success, drew her hands on either side of her. There was a moment in which she gathered her thoughts, a brief second where she gladly anticipated how freely she'd be able to inhale afterwards, but when she tried to push herself up, her chest exploded in white-hot blades of agony. And it was ironic how dull the fire in her lungs felt right then compared to the inferno in her chest.

Darkness swelled and overtook her, and when it finally receded, she had no way of knowing if she'd passed out for ten seconds or ten minutes. The world was a haze. The sky blurred, a dull ringing filled her ears, and she couldn't really feel the concrete beneath her fingertips anymore. Blinking slowly, she desperately tried to restore some semblance of calm even as her heart raced in panic.

Gradually, the sky sharpened and her senses returned, but when she took in a slow, hesitant breath,
there was no ignoring the wet gurgle that accompanied it.

A punctured lung.

As if everything wasn't complicated enough, she'd managed to puncture a lung.

The culprit was likely a broken rib – that would explain the ungodly pain in her chest – and if her crackling inhales were any indication, there was fluid in the lung as well. Naturally, that would be her luck. She couldn't recall swallowing since the explosion, but it was possible traces of saliva had leaked down her throat. Then again, it was just as possible she was bleeding internally.

Jane's mind readily settled on something to analyze, clinically noting that if air was leaking out of her injured lung, the other would eventually collapse from a lack of room to expand. Not that it mattered much anyway. A person her size could only live for thirty minutes at the most when suffering from a punctured lung with liquid in it, and with the current state of the city, there would be no one coming to her rescue any time soon. By the time help arrived, she would be long dead, having either drowned in her own fluids or asphyxiated from a lack of oxygen.

Preferable to death as a red smear on the ground after more than a thousand foot fall, but still…

The detached analysis was calming, and in the aftermath, Jane felt strangely resigned. There was no honor in facing death with fear. She'd been raised on that belief. So it was at least some bit of comfort that, although the end she faced wasn't necessarily one to be proud of, it wouldn't be a complete disgrace. Death could come on far worse wings.

Warmth on her face drew Jane's focus to the sun's brilliance first, then the sky.

It was beautiful, vast and endless and boundlessly stretching out as far as the eye could see in wispy strokes of white on unadulterated blue. She traced the cloud's patterns, followed their graceful dance through the heavens. And if she ignored the battle and the sharp, definitive lines that were the modern world, she could almost imagine she was home.

Smell the briny sea and the sharp bite of coming winter…

Feel the earth and the soft edges of grass beneath her…

Hear the gentle ebb and flow of the tides over the cliff's edge…

But home dissolved into steel and rock in the span of a blink, and with nothing left except the sound of war in her ears, smoke in her nose, and ashes on her tongue, the wrongness of it all fueled the last shreds of determination. Because she refused to die in a crumpled heap atop a pile of stone.

Gritting her teeth against the shooting pain, Jane crawled to her feet. There was a second where she swayed, clutching tightly to the coiled top of the air conditioning unit as darkness crept in from the edges of her sight, but then it ebbed and she was able to stand upright, or as upright as broken ribs and a punctured lung allowed.

The sky darkened without warning before being split apart by streaks of lightning and crashing thunder. Jane could feel the energy in the air. The static danced along her skin like a tangible thing, made the hair on her arms and the back of her neck stand on end. And when the electricity dissolved, the lightning faded, and the skies cleared, she was surprisingly unsurprised to see him standing where he hadn't been before.

Alabaster skin, dark hair, grey-green eyes, adorned in familiar shades of green and gold and black that he'd worn since the beginning… it was like looking at a memory, peeling the image directly
from the past and pasting it in the here and now. She drank in his form, and it wasn't the first time she thought how easy it would be to drown in the sea of details that comprised him.

"Loki."

"Jane…." Something that vaguely resembled concern flitted across his face before it shifted into that cool indifference he'd always worn so well. "What are you doing here?"

She could have answered, allowed him to take the lead as he so often had in the past. Or she could have given voice to any one of the thousand things she'd thought or felt since the last time they'd seen each other. But still able to hear battle and – hidden deeper in the background – the silence of death, all she could do was revise his inquiry.

"What are you doing?"

"Ignorance has never suited you, Jane." Loki's mouth curled in an unamused smile. "Surely you can surmise my goal."

So they were going to play that game. The combined disregard and blasé attitude had Jane frowning. Surreal as it felt, though, she could go with it, pretend that the last time they saw each other hadn't been nearly six months ago as he fell into the yawning cosmos.

The staff in his hand caught her attention. That, and the smoking remains of a building that had just crumbled under the weight of a fallen Leviathan. "Total destruction?"

"A world made free." Loki held up a hand to correct her. "I would rule Midgard as a benevolent god."

"I saw what you did in Germany." Turning, he walked a meandering path to her left, his pace sorely out of context with the situation. Jane followed his every movement, but he looked up, out, down… anywhere but her. "There's nothing benevolent about carving out someone's eye or trying to kill a defenseless man. True leaders don't need fear to control others."

"Don't they?" At that, Loki met her gaze. "The one thing mortals cherish above all is the idea of freedom, but they fail to realize that freedom is crippling. With too much sovereignty, life results in nothing more than a race for power."

"I already heard this speech."

"Yet you refuse to accept the truth of it, you who know me to be right." There was a steely glint to his gaze that made her shiver involuntarily. "How could I not rule with an iron fist? Resistance is natural when independence is so highly prized. So when the mortals refuse to yield, what choice do I have but to meet force with force?"

Jane shuffled closer, biting back a hiss of pain at the pain that accompanied the movement. "This isn't some you brought it upon yourself kind of thing. You can rationalize it all you want, but the bottom line is that you're killing people, Loki. Innocent people."

"No one is innocent."

"It doesn't matter. They should be able to live their lives how they want, whether it's a struggle or not. You…." One hand flattened against her broken ribs while the other pointed accusingly. "Have no right to take that away from them, from me."

Mirroring her actions, Loki took one step forward, then another. "I beg to differ."
Part of her wanted to look down, but giving in wasn't an option, not in the game they were playing. Because it was a game. A dangerous game of intimidation. And while Loki had always excelled at intimidation, the effect it had on her had somewhat lessened over time while her stubborn willfulness had only grown.

Jane arched a brow. "Oh?"

"Yes." Another step closer. "I have every right." Only a few feet separated them now, and she was forced to lift her chin to maintain eye contact. "This is my due, Jane." How could she ever have forgotten how tall he was? "I was born to be a king."

"And I was born to die in the middle of a battlefield, but sometimes things don't work out like we expect!" The reminder had less of an impact than she'd hoped, and his stony expression made her want to tear out her hair in frustration. "The time you spent in the Void obviously didn't change you at all. You're just as conceited and arrogant as you always were, always thinking you're so superior."

"Then we have both remained unchanged since the ages have done little to dull your tongue. It's as sharp as ever, I see."

"This…" Jane gestured to the wreckage and the aerial battles still taking place. "All of this is bullshit. I know you well enough to know something else is going on, and for the God of Lies, you've never been very good at lying to me. So tell me, Loki, why are you here?"

A cruel smirk tugged at his mouth. "To rule this—"

"Why are you really here?"

Loki's smirk fell. Maybe it was the interruption or the way her eyes flashed with righteous anger or the determination evident in her clenched jaw… whatever the reason, it had him staring at her hard with an intensity that burned like fire. He shifted almost imperceptibly, and for one long second, Jane thought he was getting ready to either kiss her or kill her.

But then he was stalking away. He gripped the remains of the concrete ledge that lined the rooftop to the point the mortar crumbled beneath his hands. He spun back around to face her, the ends of his surcoat slicing through the air before curling around his legs.

"Is this not my legacy, Jane?" Wearing a deceptively calm façade, Loki extended his hands wide. "Is this not what I have been foretold to do?"

And it was oddly funny how a few simple words threw the entire situation into startling clarity.

"That's why you're doing this?" A telling silence was the only response Jane received. "You, of all people, should know the future is never set in stone."

"I, of all people..." Where her voice had risen with awful awareness, Loki's lowered dangerously. "You maintain your belief that the realms are subject to chance. After all we've been through, you hold on to hope that you alone control your life. Why? You are no fool, Jane. You have seen the signs as well as I."

The space between them began to lessen. He crossed the rooftop, approaching her with such purpose that it took every ounce of resolve Jane possessed not to backtrack. Only when virtually no space remained between them did he stop.

"There is no faith to be had, no free will to be executed outside of that which has been written."
continued, she was surprised to hear his tone had lost its iron edge. "You think it was by chance that we met?"

She wanted to say yes.

Deep down, however, she wasn't quite sure how to answer that.

Not anymore.

Without his fire to stoke it, Jane's exasperation burned itself out, and she was left gazing up at Loki earnestly. "I think the future is vague. It's indistinct. You may think your life is ordained, but you're wrong." The hand not pressing to her ribs reached up to lightly touch his forearm. "The future doesn't bind you anymore than time bound me."

"That is where you're wrong." His eyes flicked back and forth between hers. "I am nothing more than a rat in a maze, confined to the walls that surround me and the road ahead. It no longer matters which path I choose to walk. They all lead to the same end."

"Loki..."

"The Norns have spoken." The fingers on her chin softened but didn't fall away. His focus did, though. It lowered until Jane was staring at dark lashes, and the eerie glow of the scepter only seemed to enhance the blue veins crisscrossing his eyelids. "This is my fate."

"It's only a book." She grasped the fabric of his sleeve. "It was just a bunch of stories."

"Stories that became strangely accurate. No..."

When Loki stepped back, the loss of his presence left Jane swaying forward into the vacant space. He took a deep, steadying breath. In that split-second between his inhale and exhale, she could literally see the workings of him as he composed himself, pulled the frayed pieces of his being back into place and stitched them together with a kind of resigned persistence. And when his eyes finally met hers, the look in them made her shiver for the second time.

"Do you not see, Jane? I am a tool forged in the fires of fate. I am the destructor, the godkiller, the slayer of worlds."

She couldn't breathe. The air snagged in her lungs.

"I am death."

And somewhere in the depths of a molten world, Jane could almost feel the devil smile.
Chapter Notes

Just a warning – this story is rated M for a reason. There will be violence and sensitive subject matter; not all chapters will be that way, though, and eventually there will be some of the more enjoyable parts that people look for in an M-rating.

Also, I know that in the movie-verse, Loki and Thor were roughly one thousand years old, but I like the idea of them being much older than that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter One

"Sometimes you wake up. Sometimes the fall kills you."

1021: Norway

The last whisper of a breath was expelled from dry, cracked lips and blown away by the wind. No strength remained in the hand she held, only its dead weight. Similarly, there was no life left in the swirling brown and green of his eyes. They used to sparkle with mirth when he would chase her around the house or tell her stories before bed. Now they were dull and flat.

She retrieved the sword from where it lay nearby and carefully rearranged his hands, placing them on his chest and curling the already stiffening fingers around the blade he'd carried since before she could remember. With a slight touch, she closed his eyelids. And it was with a silent prayer of a quick journey to Valhalla that she said goodbye to her father.

Slowly, she rose and looked to the distant shoreline.

He wouldn't want her to mourn. After all, he was finally to be reunited with her mother, his wife. However, knowing he wouldn't want her to mourn and being able to fulfill his wishes were two entirely different things. Grief was an anchor, heavy chains dragging down her heart and mooring her in sadness.

"What do I do now, Father?" A solitary tear coursed its way down her cheek. "How will I go on?"

But she received no answer. When the wind died down, there was no sound except the pervasive burden of silence. That, and her despairing sigh. Gradually, she stepped away to retrieve her own sword. It still lay where she'd dropped it right before she'd run to her father's side as he collapsed, but when she picked it up, it no longer carried the same sense of comfort it had before. Instead, the worn hilt felt unwelcome in her hand, unwanted, a constant reminder.
Signe.

That was the name she had been given.

It meant *latest victory*, but the truth was that it felt like a lie.

Standing in the razed village, she turned in a bleak, sluggish circle. The surrounding desolation reaffirmed her belief that nothing about the current situation was victorious. If it was a victory, it was a hollow one.

There was blood on her sword, her leather armor was battered and rent in several places, and her helmet had long since disappeared, but it was difficult to do anything except remember what it took to live because her body seemed to have forgotten. Her heart thumped slowly, her breath came even slower. Muscles no longer functioned as they should, choosing to remain stiff and unresponsive, but her head made up for their inaction with the way it pounded like a second heartbeat in her skull. Still, it was nothing compared to the man whose brains had splattered across her boots after the keen edge of her blade had carved open his head.

Then again, there was a certain peace in death that made her somewhat envious of his fate.

Ever since she was young, her parents had always told her there was honor to be found in a good death. Back then, all she could think was that death was surely painful. She'd seen the gruesome wounds others in the village bore when they returned from their journeys and the agony people faced when they succumbed to sickness and disease. She'd been a witness to the torturously slow death her mother had endured at the hands of the white plague.

But now… now, all she could think was that if death was painful, what did that make life?

What a relief it would be if her heart would only stop its hurting. And if that relief came through death, so be it. A heart could only hurt if it was alive, yes? Perhaps she'd been wrong in her naive youth. Maybe there was no anguish in death, only tranquility. If that were the case, let death come for her, let it take her on swift wings to the golden halls of her people, let it soothe the ache.

She was ready.

She wasn't afraid.

Only a few days ago, she'd been sitting at an oaken table with her family and friends as they celebrated the end of winter with a feast fit for a king. They had laughed and sang and mercilessly teased her childhood friend Hallsteinn when he nearly fell into the fire in his drunkenness as he attempted to woo the fair maiden Dagny with a dance.

Now, she stood in the charred remains of the village in which she'd been raised and watched as a fire that was so much larger and so much brighter than the one that night consumed everything… the oaken table, the homes, the bodies, the memories.

It seemed so surreal, like a dream within a dream. It wasn’t a dream, though. She could run and scream and pinch herself all she wanted, but she’d only end up with tired limbs, a hoarse voice, and bruises because there was no waking from the nightmare. It was real.

She *had* laughed, she *had* sang, she *had* teased.

But she'd also watched the ship appear on the horizon flying a flag with unrecognizable colors.

The majority of the village's warriors had left to go raiding for supplies after the harsh winter, and
she'd been scouring the horizon for the familiar ships of her people when she was met with the newcomers instead. The people had come from a distant land to preach a bizarre idea, something about the one, true God. They called it Christianity.

It wasn't the first time her people had heard the idea. They'd come across it increasingly in their travels as it spread throughout the rest of the land. However, while they tolerated the radical concepts others had adopted, they were not so accepting of those same beliefs being forced upon them. So when they refused to acknowledge the new practice by submitting to an exercise called baptism, fighting had broken out. Women and children and village elders, as it turned out, were no match for soldiers.

But there would be no end to the pain she felt, no mollification for her aching heart. Not unless it was by her own hand because, aside from the stray dog wandering the outskirts of the village, she was the only one that remained.

She was alone.

It seemed unnaturally cruel that her people were dead, scattered about her in a kaleidoscope of blood and tissue and dismembered limbs, while she lived on. Their eyes were glazed over like the thin sheet of ice that covered the water on the first night of winter, and if she couldn't join them in death, she desperately wished she could at least erase the blank stares and frozen expressions, breathe life back into them.

In the end, though, it was easier to not look at their faces. At the very least, it helped her maintain some semblance of sanity. Because looking meant seeing and seeing meant recognizing and recognizing meant accepting the fact that the person she'd known, spoken to, laughed with only days before was now nothing more than a lump of lifeless flesh, a dead thing bleeding out onto the ground.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied movement.

Despite her resolve to avoid the details, the promise of life had her whipping around so fiercely that the ache in her head surged and threatened to bring her to her knees. She pushed back against the darkness, though, and searched. She desperately hunted for the rise and fall of a chest, the turn of a head, the wiggle of fingers. But the only thing she saw was a hint of green that glinted out of existence so quickly she was left wondering if it had even been there to start with.

She stared at the spot between two bodies – don't look at their faces, don't look at their faces – where the movement had been. The air seemed to shiver and tremble unnaturally over the two prone figures. However, as the seconds ticked by and nothing else occurred, the cold awareness that it was probably only her imagination settled around her.

Clenching her teeth in frustration, she turned once more.

And she'd just completed the circle when she saw him.

Immediately, her adrenaline surged. He stood where no one had been before. A small part of her absentmindedly noted that it was in the exact spot she'd seen the glimmer of green and felt relieved that at least she wasn't losing her mind while the larger part of her consciousness settled on the way the energy flooded her body and made her heart trip a quicker rhythm. It was rejuvenating, and she instinctively raised her sword and readied her stance at the new opponent. She may have been bruised and broken and alone, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

However, the potential adversary didn't so much as glance at her. Instead, he remained where he
was, standing in profile, gazing out at what remained of the village. Without the gratification of action, her vitality slowly seeped away, and in its wake she was able to grasp the fact that the man before her hadn't been part of the original battle.

But then, could he even be considered a man?

Lowering her sword to her side, she studied him.

With gleaming armor and pale skin and fine features and regal stance, he was unlike anything she'd ever seen. The people of her land were as rugged as the terrain, coarse inside and out, tanned and freckled and red-cheeked from time spent on the open waters. They were a seafaring folk through and through, and there was no place for noble demeanors and elegant garb in the wild lands in which they lived. Not even the Christians had appeared looking like this man did.

So who was he?

And where had he come from?

She briefly wondered whether he was, as the Christians might have said, the Angel of Death come to take her away to Valhalla or Heaven or wherever it was the honorable went once life had ended. But all the depictions of their holy creatures were soft and elegant, wearing white wings and robes. If that were the case, the person before her didn't belong to the Christians or their singular god. No, he was all dark colors and severe angles. Emerald green and coal black instead of clean white, hard points of armor instead of flowing robes, gilded horns curving in a graceful arc above his head instead of downy wings.

The wind stirred. It played with her hair, causing it to swell and fall, and the movement of it seemed to catch his eye. He glanced from her to the sky to the ground in quick succession before turning to face her completely. Even with the distance between them, he was so tall, so striking, so… intimidating.

"Are you death?"

Her voice ringing out over the press of silence sounded strange in her ears, and considering she hadn't planned on saying anything, the words surprised her. They didn't appear to surprise him, though. He continued to watch her impassively across the space, grey-green eyes boring into honeyed brown.

"That depends."

Alarm would have been the natural reaction. If not entirely alarmed, then at least mildly frightened. Even wary would have been wise. However, all traces of common sense where dashed when her feet moved of their own volition, carrying her towards him instead. It seemed courage – or was it foolishness? – hadn't abandoned her, even when intelligence so obviously had.

He followed her approach with an unreadable expression.

"On?"

With the heat of the potential battle gone, she began to notice the things that her mind had previously shut out. The rank scent of loss on the wind, the burning sting of a gash sliced across her thigh that made her limp, the wet sound of her footfalls, the way her steps slid in the crimson-dyed blades of grass. Her stomach rolled, but she forced down the bile in the back of her throat.

"Death is so final." His focus shifted from her to roam the sea of bodies that surrounded them. "So…
The setting sun bled onto the smooth surface of the water behind him, staining it a dark red that perfectly matched the color that covered her arms and armor, and threw him into a dark shadow as she drew close. When only a few yards separated them, she stopped.

A certain numbness burrowed its way into her very bones as she followed his direction. Her gaze glided blindly over the slaughter with the constant mantra—don't look at their faces, don't look at their faces—because that was not her aunt, that was not her neighbor, that was not the girl she'd played with as a child. They were nothing if she didn't focus on them. Blank faces… that was all they were.

When her attention slid back to his, she found him to be already looking at her. "Do you fear death, mortal?"

Again, there was the opportunity for wisdom. A sensible person would heed the warning and acknowledge the situation was dangerous. Or perhaps it was simply him that was dangerous. He certainly had the presence of a warrior. It didn't take a behemoth of a man to be deadly, and it wasn't difficult to pick up on the underlying sense that he could kill her whenever he wished. But then, her father hadn't called her obstinate and willful for no reason.

So while others might have been put off by the address or daunted by the implication that he wasn't mortal, she merely lifted her chin proudly. "No."

The bold response earned her an expression of intense regard, a slightly furrowed brow, and a couple steps. The space between them lessened to mere feet, but she refused to retreat. That didn't prevent her breath from quickening at his proximity, though. He had appeared tall from a distance. Up close, he towered over her.

"Why not?"

"Because…" But as soon as she began, words failed her, the truth hidden deep within the yawning emptiness of herself.

"That is not a reason."

She frowned.

What held back her fear of death? It was more than the honor of her people, more than having nothing left to lose, more than the apathetic way her heart was beating.

Her eyes lowered and slid to the side. She didn't want to—don't look at their faces, don't look at their faces—but her attention settled first on the grimace of death that twisted a man's mouth and then on the almost serene emptiness of his eyes. And even though her stomach twisted when she recognized him as one of her father's closest friends, at least she found the reason in that vacant stare.

"Because death is simple." Natural. Calm. Unassuming. "It's life that is difficult."

Silence stretched between them for a long moment, broken only by the crackling fire that still ate at the shell of a house and the mournful wailing of the wind. To her left, a burning timber crashed to the ground.

When he finally broke the silence, his voice was low, thoughtful. "There are many that would not share your sentiment."
Those that don't understand have never stood where I stand now." Surrounded by what remained of her friends and family. Alone. The word echoed through her mind, so wrong and unfair. Then again, no one had ever said the fates were kind. "The only thing I fear is…" She hesitated, then dismissed what she'd been about to say. "Well, I suppose that's not really important."

In the end, fear did nothing and accomplished nothing. What room was there for fear in the dark, bitter places of her heart when it was already full of despair and hurt? It was easier to push it aside.

"Hm…" The contemplative noise had her meeting his gaze yet again, but he didn't expound on what he found so interesting or intriguing or whatever it was that had him watching her the way he was. He only looked back and forth between her eyes a few times before refocusing on some point over her shoulder. "What happened?"

"I was right in thinking you're not from here." No one could suddenly be in the middle of a battlefield the way he had and not know what transpired. When he didn't respond, she offered a vague reply. "A disagreement."

"As far as answers go, yours tend to be lacking."

Fingering the torn hem of her undershirt and pulling on the piece of thread that had come loose, she sighed deeply. "It's a long story."

"I have time."

"I don't."

As if to emphasize her point, the distant sound of a horn drew their attention. Out in the bay, a ship flying a flag identical to the one that was still anchored in the deep water came up alongside it. The wind carried their shouts, and she could just make out figures on the ship boarding a small boat while others lowered it to the water.

"More Christians." The mumbled words were meant more for herself, but he turned back to face her.

"They are the ones who did this?"

She gave a nondescript shrug. "It seems so silly… for all this to have happened because of a dispute about gods." Dispassionately, she watched the boat approach the shoreline. "They called us pagans. They said we were incorrect in our beliefs. But is the need to be correct worth all this?"

"Belief can be a powerful motivator."

He was right. And what burned even more was the knowledge that her people were just as much at fault. The Christians wished to convert them to their beliefs, but they had resisted with the mindset that their own beliefs were correct. One stubborn set of beliefs pitched against the other, as if force alone could convince a group of people to accept something as true.

So in the end, violence begets violence, and the result of such stalwart and prideful beliefs was the devastation sprawled around her.

"Will you flee?"

Her gaze slid away from the boat and across the fields to the forest in the distance with its backdrop of jagged mountain peaks. There was a path in the midst of the trees that would lead to safety. To run would mean life, but…
"I cannot escape." Adrenaline had initially disguised the severity of the gash on her thigh. Now she didn’t even need to look down to confirm it. The slow, steady trickle of blood running down her leg said enough. "The horses are gone, and even if I managed to outrun the Christians, I'd die before reaching the next village."

A cold shot of… something sliced through her. She’d meant it when she claimed to not be afraid of dying, so it wasn't really the fear of death that gripped her, but fearful dread of the slow, agonizing prelude to it. She knew all too well what the wound would look like in a few days’ time. Puffy and oozing with infection, tinged green around the edges, surrounded by dark lines that promised an eventual demise.

The images were still plaguing her when the smooth expanse of a dark breastplate obscured her sight. Blinking, she focused on the line of gold, following its swooping path across to the detailed vambraces on his arms and up to the plates at his shoulder. It wasn't until she felt a touch that she simultaneously leveled him with a wary look and jerked her arm from his hand.

Or she would have, had he not maintained an iron grip.

With the first attempt to break free a resounding failure, she redoubled her efforts, reaching up in an attempt to pry away the fingers wrapped around her forearm. However, he held fast, forcing her hand and the sword it held in a safer direction. "Release me."

"Hold still."

"I said…” She growled it out. “Release me."

"And I said, hold still."

Gritting her teeth, she abandoned grappling with his wrist and focused on a single finger, but the results remained the same. He didn't even budge when she threw her weight back in a desperate attempt to rip her arm free. It didn't make sense. She'd never been the strongest girl in the village, but she certainly wasn't weak, by any means.

"Woman…” His warningly stern tone quieted her struggling but not her irritation. “You said you do not fear death. Perhaps you’d like to test the strength of your resolve? No? Then hold still."

Frustrated, she glared at him, although the scowl was wasted seeing how he wasn't paying a bit of attention to her. Instead, he looked down, fixated on her injured leg. She irately watched him study the wound, but when he reached out to cover the laceration with his hand, she couldn't help but flinch. It hurt enough on its own. The added pressure of his hand sent white spots dancing across the backs of her eyelids.

"What are you—?"

But then the pain suddenly disappeared and stole her words with it. Her eyes flew open, darting back and forth between his down-turned head and the hand on her thigh. The area around the wound began to take on a greenish hue, but when he pulled away, she was astounded to see nothing but smooth, clear skin. No blood, no scar. The only sign that there had even been an injury was the cut in the fabric of her trousers.

Stunned, she breathed. "Sorcery…” People had been put to death for practicing witchcraft in the past, but never had she actually seen the proof of their magic. There was no denying the evidence before her now, though. "Are you a warlock? A magician?"

"I am not human if that is what you ask."
Apparently satisfied with the results of his work, he met her eyes as she absentmindedly slid her thumb back and forth across the freshly healed skin, remembering the way he'd addressed her earlier. "If you're not mortal, you must be immortal. What are you, a god?"

"Not exactly." The corners of his mouth twitched in thinly-veiled amusement, which only proceeded to make her blush in embarrassment. What else was she supposed to think with him appearing out of thin air and possessing magical abilities? "Although that would be the closest thing you mortals would have to describing it."

She considered everything he'd said for a moment. "Of all the times to appear, you chose the aftermath of a battle. Does that mean us mortals..." She deliberately emphasized the term to express how much she didn't appreciate the derogatory way in which he said it. "Would call you the God of War?"

"I've never much had the taste for war that others do. My preferences lie elsewhere."

"As in?"

"Mischief." And the way his voice lowered while his lips curled in an impish smile made her inherently nervous.

The wind blowing off the sea carried the approaching men's voices, and she wondered which of the two options were least deadly: the Christians and their steadfast belief or the man before her and his crooked smirk.

Regarding him warily, she began to carefully ease away. "Forgive me if knowing I'm speaking with the God of Mischief doesn't put me at ease."

"It would be unwise if it did." He took a single step forward, following her retreat. "Especially now that you are in my debt."

Her backward progression came to a jerking halt. "What?"

He looked pointedly down to her leg. "I saved your life. I didn't believe mortals so ungrateful that they wouldn't recognize such a significant act."

"They're not." It took her a moment to catch what caused his smirk to widen. "We're not." He took another deliberate step towards her, but she forced herself not to retreat further. In only two more steps, he closed the distance she'd managed to place between them, knocking away the point of the sword she extended towards him with the back of his hand. She stared without even bothering to hide her suspicion. "You're more or less a god. What could I possibly do that you couldn't do yourself?"

Really, there were quite a few things he could ask of her, some of them decidedly unpleasant, but she tried not to focus on those.

"My price is nothing you cannot fulfill." He ignored her uneasy shifting. "All I require..." Still on edge, she started when he made a strange, twisting motion with his hands. There was a dull flash of green, and when the light faded, a small object lay cradled in his hand. "Is that you accept this."

She leaned forward, trying to get a better glimpse. "What is it?"

Without warning, he tossed the item. She caught it out of instinct and brought it close. Small, round, unnaturally warm... it didn't appear to be dangerous. But when it began to emit a soft glow, she glanced at him with concern.
"It's only an apple."

"I've never seen any apple that looked like this."

"That is because it is not of Midgard."

Her fascination with the fruit allowed her to write off the strange word in favor of hesitantly looking to him. "What should I do with it?" But he only shrugged in response.

"Eat it, plant it, burn it for all I care. It is for you to do with as you see fit. My only requirement is that you accept it."

The crackling fire still burned to her right, and she briefly considered tossing it into the flames. There had to be some catch to the situation, some hidden agenda to his request… she just didn't know what. But instead of throwing it away, or even just letting it fall into the puddle of blood nearby, she discreetly tucked it beneath her breastplate. She'd decide what to do with it later.

He smirked again when she haughtily lifted her chin, daring him to say something. Before he could speak, though, another voice cut through the silence between them. The men had reached the shore and were now coming up the sloping hillside towards the village. Immediately, her heart began to race.

She gauged the distance to the forest. Even with her leg healed, it was unlikely she'd be able to outrun them. The men were too close. She had no choice but to face them. Teeth clenched in determination, she tightened her hold on the sword and turned back only to find the – man, god, whatever he was – walking away from her.

"Where are you going?" She followed after him when he didn't stop, not realizing that she'd walked directly into the Christians’ line of sight until she heard their reinforced shouting. However, he continued to stride away.

"I do not meddle in the affairs of humans." It was clearly a lie considering how he'd prevented her eventual death, but she chose to keep that thought to herself. "You must fend for yourself now."

She frowned.

Of course he would leave her to fight her own way out. Still, he'd healed her. At least she now had a chance.

"Have you decided, then?" At that, he paused. A particularly strong gust of wind whipped at his cape as he turned his head. He remained in profile for a period before meeting her eyes. One of his eyebrows arched in a silent question, nearly disappearing under the edge of the helmet that dipped low on his brow. "Are you death?"

Slowly, the brow returned to normal as the corners of his mouth quirked in a wry smirk. "Not today."

They continued to stare at each other, both of them ignoring the approaching men. And when he finally turned, took a step, and disappeared into nothingness, she wasn't even shocked. She stared at the spot where he'd been and watched the telltale slice of green wink out of existence.

But then the Christians were there and she was spinning to face them.

One of them stood in front of the group saying something, but she was so tense with anticipation, she couldn't focus on his words. The only thing she could hear was the rushing of her blood, the way it
pounded an angry beat in her ears. The man held up his hands, but the placating motion wouldn't register until later.

At the time, she heard him order his men to go after her; only later would she realize he'd asked her if she was alright. At the time, she saw two of the men rush her; only later would she realize that it had been her that sprinted forward with her sword held high. At the time, she fought back against their ruthless attacks; only later would she realize it had been her on the assault.

Only later would she realize none of the men ever asked her about the strange person she'd been with who had disappeared into thin air.

She battled fiercely, consumed by the fire burning through her veins, without noticing the lack of action against her. All she was aware of was the metallic scream in the air when steel met steel. The loud crack when she jabbed her elbow into a nose. The way the sea was on fire with the last brilliant light of the sun.

A fist connecting with her shoulder jerked her from her thoughts, the force of the blow sending her staggering away. She'd only taken two steps when a boot hooked around her ankle and tipped her already wavering stability out of control. The blade slipped from her fingers – she could almost hear her father's voice reminding her that to lose her sword was to lose her life – as she half-stumbled, half-jumped over the things that used to be people, and she was inane thinking—don't look at their faces, don't look at their faces—instead of concentrating, so when she slipped in what looked like a twisted bundle of intestines, there was no one to blame but herself.

It only took a moment to fall.

Her hands reached out instinctively to catch herself, and everything probably would have been fine if it hadn't been for the body that came up to meet her.

The next thing she knew, she was sprawled across the person's abdomen and her hand had disappeared into the wicked cut that had sliced open the torso. The rotten stink of blood, excrement, and whatever had been the person's last meal that had been powerful enough when standing were unbearable when only inches from her face. And if breathing in death wasn't enough, something slick and still partially warm shifted around her hand when she moved.

Then she was looking at the face.

She was looking at his face.

And when it sunk in that it was her father beneath her, that it was his slippery organs squelching between her fingers…

Later, she wouldn't know whether she screamed or not. The only thing she'd remember would be the wet sound of her hand pulling free and the violent way her body curled in on itself as she vomited up the contents of her stomach.

She was still heaving when she heard the footsteps through the blood and grass as the leader of the men walked up to kneel in front of her.

"This shall pass, my child." A hand rested gently on her head. "By the grace of God, you will overcome this, and if you seek Him, you will be comforted in your time of need. Only with His strength will you find peace."

Her father used to brush his fingers through her hair when she was young and the nightmares disrupted her sleep, same as her mother had before she died. How simple it would’ve been to pretend
it was one of those times. She wanted to so bad. But she couldn't. Not when the hand on her head wasn't nearly as large or weighty, not when the fingers were absent of callouses earned through years of sailing and fighting, not when her father was so very, very dead not ten meters away.

The man said something else as he stepped back. Hands closed around her arms and lifted her up, but she was weak and boneless. She couldn't even muster the strength to resist anymore, just slumped forward, letting them carry her away as the darkness rose up to claim her.

The burlap was rough against her skin, but it only inspired her to scrub harder.

It had been nearly a week since she'd woken up aboard the Christians' ship. Much to her consternation, she'd been treated well in that week. It would have been easier to despise them if they hadn't given her fresh clothing or three square meals a day or freedom to roam the boat as a guest instead of a prisoner. Hate would have come so much easier if they hadn't expressed their sympathies and apologized for the harsh actions of those who had attacked her village.

No manner of hospitality and kindness could completely wipe away the past, though.

There were times she could still see her mother's blood-flecked lips and the way her rattling coughing would stain the sheets with crimson drops. The vision often came in the dark and quiet of the night, unbidden. Now, that darkness held another image. Her father. Not smiling or laughing as he so often had been, but cold and pale and stiff, the only smile being the one carved into his torso.

She resumed her vigorous rubbing.

The bits and pieces of her father's entrails weren't beneath her fingernails anymore, but she doubted she'd ever forget how horrified she'd been when she first awoke and noticed the dried particles of him that darkened the white tips of her nails.

"What's your name?"

Having believed herself to be alone in the cargo hold of the ship, she jumped in surprise and looked up to see a small, familiar face peering around a crate. From the moment she stepped out of the sick bay, she had caught the child watching her. It occurred almost daily, but it was always a silent observation full of curiosity. Apparently, the girl had finally mustered the courage to speak.

With a bored expression, she carefully folded the burlap. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not, but it would be nice to at least know what to call you. My name is Elizabeth." The girl waited, staring at her with a hopeful smile that refused to fade no matter how long the silence stretched. Eventually, and still obviously unperturbed, she meandered around the room. "It's a miracle you're alive. That's what they're saying, at least." She pointed to the deck overhead. "They said it is only by God's mercy you survived what happened."

She almost snorted with disdain.

Mercy.

Is that what they called it?
Elizabeth didn't appear to notice her contempt, though. Instead, she tilted her head in thought. Her face twisted and her brows scrunched together for a moment before asking for clarification. "What did happen on shore?"

Stubbornness and haughtiness, pride and folly, anger and hurt, death and destruction. She saw all too clearly the deeply rotten things of which humans were really made. On shore, she discovered just how ugly the world could really be. But Elizabeth's eyes were blue and pure and held no knowledge of the evils of the world. It was likely she'd never even experienced loss. So even though reality would eventually set in, she couldn't bear to be the one who tarnished the innocence before her.

"Nothing important."

Elizabeth stared at her suspiciously, but only a moment later, the misgiving was gone. "If you say so." Then she was skipping across the room and standing on her tiptoes to peer into a barrel packed with strips of dried meat. "So about your name…" After digging out a piece of meat, she took a large bite and continued around it. "If you don't tell me, I'll have to choose one for you."

She raised an eyebrow. "And what kind of name would you give me?"

"Let's see…" A finger tapped against her lips in a mock show of deliberation. "I think I'd call you Jane."

The name sounded strange. "Jane." She murmured it, and it sounded even stranger on her tongue. At the same time, though, it could have been worse. The Christians had many odd names.

"One of my best friends is named Jane, and you look so very much like her." Their eyes met again, and Elizabeth smiled. "And then Foster, of course, since that's my family name. Jane Foster." If possible, her smile grew even wider. "Yes, I believe that's what I'll call you."

"My name is Signe."

"No." The girl shook her head, mind already made up. "I like Jane better. You know, it actually suits you quite well."

"How so?"

"Well, the men said that God spared your life because he was compassionate to whatever happened on shore, and Jane means God is merciful…" For each of the two points, the girl held out a hand, before clapping them together with a grin. "So, it's perfect!"

It was also ironic.

Mercy received from a god she didn't even know, didn't really care to know, had fought against knowing.

Without warning, the ship pitched. She steadied herself against a barrel of mead, but in the far corner, a small object rolled out of the bundle of her original clothes and armor. Leaning down, she picked it up, immediately recognizing it as the apple the supposed God of Mischief had given her. A few dark splotches marred the surface, but at her touch, the majority of it still gleamed with that same strange glow that seemed even more unnatural in the murky, dank hold of the ship.

"Eat it, plant it, burn it for all I care. It is for you to do with as you see fit."

In the last bit of commotion in the village and her adjusting to life aboard the ship, she'd nearly forgotten about the apple. Now she found herself curiously thinking… wondering… what did it do?
What would happen if she ate it?

She turned the apple over in her hand, spinning it as though the right angle would suddenly reveal an answer. However, the only thing it revealed were the shadows its faint glow cast on the wall and probably in the hollow spaces below her eyes. Feeling somewhat silly, she surreptitiously lifted her hand and held the apple to her nose, but sniffing it yielded no results either. If anything, it made it all the more confusing because there was no tang or mildly sweet scent. There wasn't the normal scent of an apple, only some strange, exotic blend of... something she couldn't even properly describe.

Her eyes drifted closed.

It smelled like sunlight that turned the early morning dew into diamonds or the energy that hovered in the air and made the hair on her arms stand on end after a thunderstorm or the first frost of winter that fell and painted the world a glittering white.

"What are you doing?" She opened her eyes and looked down to the face that had appeared at her elbow. "What is that?"

"I'm... um... nothing." Rotating the fruit once more, she sighed and lowered her hand. "It's only an apple." After a few more seconds of observation, she held the fruit out to Elizabeth. "Are you hungry?"

"No, thank you." Elizabeth backed away, waving her hands. "My parents always told me not to eat food that glows."

She smiled at the girl's lack of concern. If she had been the one to come across a glowing fruit at such a young age, she would have been significantly more inquisitive. Then again, that also explained her inability to set it aside now. "Your parents told you that, hm?"

But Elizabeth had already busied herself with inspecting the contents of a crate. Likewise, Signe – or was she Jane now? – busied herself with inspecting the apple in her hand.

It was a strange thing. Even in her petite hands, it was small. There was also the fact that it felt significantly warmer than normal. Not at all like any of the apples she'd eaten in her life.

Still, despite its size, temperature, and radiant quality, it was only an apple. If the man had wanted to hurt her, he could have done so easily. It wasn't like she hadn't given him plenty of chances. At the same time, though, he wouldn't have needed to even dirty his hands. In the end, all he would've had to do was stand back and watch the wound on her leg slowly take her life. But he hadn't killed her. He'd saved her.

Blinking, she watched Elizabeth wrap a silky piece of fabric around her body and twirl before looking out the porthole. The sky was dark and vast, lights glimmering in its depths, while the moon turned the water to silver. Across that sea was her home. The structures might have been gone, the people might have been scattered, but it was still her home. Someday, she'd return there... when the ache in her heart had lessened and the memories didn't make her breath hitch. For now, though, she'd wait.

She looked down, spinning the apple a few more times. It was only a piece of fruit, just a harmless apple.

What harm could come from eating an apple?

So with the fading traces of a small smile on her face, Jane Foster – because there was no room for Signe in the place Elizabeth called England – touched the apple delicately to her lips. Closing her
eyes, she could see it. There was sunlight, there was energy, there was winter.

And when she took a bite, it was the taste of time that settled on her tongue.

Chapter End Notes

Come follow me on "tumblr"! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

I do not claim at all to be an expert on history; I can only say I enjoy reading about it. An unreal amount of researching will be done to try and make each chapter as historically accurate as possible, but I’m only human, so don’t hate me if I’m completely off mark with something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two

“And now it's in you, secrecy. Ancient and vicious, luscious as dark velvet; it blooms in you, a poppy made of ink.”

1260: Scotland

A lilting melody and the excited voices of the clan members drifted inside, occasionally sounding louder when a breeze stirred the fabric draped over the windows. Jane sighed to herself and paused to wipe a drop of sweat from her brow before resuming the task at hand. Between the hangings that blocked the outside air and the fire in the hearth, the dwelling was growing uncomfortably warm.

But they were a necessary evil. The fire replaced the light obscured by the heavy wool window-coverings, required now because it wouldn't be proper for everyone to see the bride before she was ready.

"We can rest if you'd like." Jane glanced away from the hair twined through her fingers to the woman that peeked up at her from the corner of her eye. "I know you must be tired."

For a moment, Jane considered it.

She was weary, hot, and hadn't seen actual daylight in what felt like an eternity, having been stuck inside for the majority of the past few days making preparations. It would be so nice to rest, actually sit for a little while or pull back one of the wool hangings and let some of the fresh, cool air inside. There was no time to relax, though. As it was, midday had already passed, which meant it would be time for the wedding before too long.

Instead, she shook her head. "I need to finish your hair so we can get you dressed." Not that getting the woman into the gown would take all that long. Jane just didn't want to be scrambling at the last minute trying to get everything done. Knowing that, she resumed braiding and styling her friend's hair.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Edana. If this whole ordeal had been left to Father, I doubt it
would've come together half as nicely as it has under your direction."

Even after six years, the name still gave Jane pause, although it wasn't nearly as bad now as it had been in the beginning.

Those first few months had been the hardest. Adjusting to a new way of life in the Scottish Highlands had been difficult enough. Add trying to remember to respond to Edana after more than two centuries of being called Jane Foster while in England to that, and an overabundance of embarrassing moments had been virtually guaranteed. On more than one occasion, she'd been going about her daily chores only to realize that someone had been repeatedly calling for her.

Thankfully enough, her odd behavior had been more or less overlooked. She'd like to think that it was because the people of Clan Donald were relatively tolerant, but she was more inclined to believe it was because the family that had taken her in was one of the older ones in the area. Regardless, she was indebted to Thome Uviet and his daughter Mariam.

"Yes, he most likely would've gone into a panic." Jane tied off the braid before sweeping it and the rest of Mariam's hair into an elegantly twisted design she'd seen several of the noblemen's wives model during her time in England. "Just count yourself lucky we're so close. I wouldn't work half as hard for anyone else."

"Close is a bit of an understatement, is it not?" When Mariam began to turn, Jane held the partially secured arrangement with one hand and forced the woman's head back into position with the other. All attempts at geniality had been forsaken after the first dozen or so times she'd had to remind her to stay still. "If we can remain strong through the repercussions of ruining Alexander's crops, then I think we can be called something more like sisters."

Jane continued to secure the sections of hair. "If I remember correctly, that was your fault."

"As if I could have let all the cows and sheep out of their paddocks by myself..." Mariam chuckled softly. "He was so angry. But even though he knew it was us, he couldn't prove it."

Remembering that night and how Alexander had stood outside their home in his bedclothes nearly pulling his hair out in frustration while he engaged in a yelling match with Thome made Jane smile as well. Thome had insisted he'd no idea what Alexander was talking about and had resolutely defended the two girls. However, the keen look in his eyes the following morning when he offhandedly commented on the fresh mud in the house made her believe he knew exactly what had happened.

Still, the fear of being caught hadn't stopped them from collapsing into giggling heaps while they'd observed Alexander run in circles attempting to chase the sheep from his land.

"I had to burn my favorite dress because of you."

"You were the one who fell, so you can't blame that on me." Mariam tried to meet her eyes, but Jane forced her back yet again, ignoring the woman's exasperated huff. "I can't help that those stains were impossible to get out."

"Like I said, I wouldn't do those ridiculous things for anyone but you."

"I know..." The woman's face might have been hidden from view, but Jane felt her smile nonetheless. "And I'll remember that when you get married."

Immediately, Jane dropped her head, trying and failing to hide the groan that worked its way out at the mention of her own marriage. "Please, Mariam, let's not start that again."
Harassment about the lack of potential suitors in her life had become a favorite pastime of the women in the village. Not a day went by – or at least it seemed that way – where one of the elder matrons wouldn't pull her aside and comment how most women her age were properly married and with children by now. It hadn't taken long for her to grow weary of the way they would indiscreetly point out every eligible bachelor that passed them, but there was little she could do except bite her tongue and accept their suggestions with a polite smile.

That wasn't to say she wasn't interested in any of the men, though.

Things were just… complicated.

"You just wait. One of these days, the right man will come along, and not even you will be able to resist." Jane snorted in amusement, but Mariam disregarded her. "He'll show up out of nowhere to sweep you off your feet, and before you know it, the two of you will be wed." At the thought, Mariam clasped her hands excitedly. "Then I'll finally be able to help with your own wedding. I'll style your hair and help you get dressed, and when you have children—"

"For goodness sake, slow down. Can we wait on discussing children until I'm actually married?"

Marriage was enough of a problem with her current situation. The idea of children… well, she didn't even know if that was possible anymore. Still, when Mariam visibly deflated at the dismissal, Jane felt a twinge of regret and rerouted the conversation.

"What about Malcolm? Have you two discussed children yet?"

The question immediately – and predictably – made Mariam sit a little straighter and smile a little wider as her cheeks flushed a light pink. "Yes, we both want…"

It was mostly things she'd heard before, so Jane partly listened to Mariam as she went on about her future family and partly listened to the growing sound of people outside as they gathered to await the ceremony. By now, everything outside would be prepared and ready. The only thing left was the bride.

Securing the last lock of hair, she stepped back and observed the end result from every angle. Attention to detail was her specialty, and she refused to let her friend get married with even a hair out of place. After a nod of approval, she led Mariam – who continued to explain how their first son would be named William after Malcolm's grandfather – to the far side of the dwelling to help her dress. The gown itself was the traditional white but boasted the added sentiment of being the same one Mariam's mother, who had passed away in childbirth, wore on her wedding day.

With the outfit complete, Jane caught Mariam's eyes, blinking away the moisture she felt in her own. "You look stunning."

Mariam positively glowed. "Do you think he'll like it?"

"He'd be a fool if he didn't." Jane brushed imaginary lint from the dress and smoothed the fabric. "And after all the work we've put into this, if he doesn't positively gape with awe at the sight of you, I'll wrench his jaw open myself."

Laughing, Mariam reached out to grasp Jane's shoulders. "Edana, I know you tire of me always saying it, but you will find someone who makes you happy, someday. I am sure of it." Her hands moved to cup Jane's face. "All of this beauty can't be for nothing." Then her eyes narrowed in mock jealousy. "It's quite depressing, to be honest. You haven't changed a bit over the years."

With an uneasy laugh, Jane pulled Mariam into a hug and wished her well before exiting the
The rest of the day was a blur.

One minute Jane was watching Malcolm Wallace and Mariam Uviet tie fabric representing the respective colors of their clans together in a knot during the ceremony. The next, she was feasting on a giant piece of roasted pig, drinking a stein of mead, and listening to Ailean shamelessly prattle on about the attractive men visiting from the other clan. Still the next, she was being led through dance after dance by several of the bachelors in attendance.

The sun hung low in the sky when Jane finally escaped the MacBryde boy – he'd come to her repeatedly for a dance, which would have been fine had he not stepped on her toes during every number – and moved away from the crowd. Leaning against an ancient willow tree, she watched the festivities and allowed herself to finally relax. Before too long, the excitement of the evening ebbed just enough for exhaustion to creep up on her. When she blinked, it felt like her eyes had turned to sand, and her muscles were sore from the constant rush of the past few days.

Maybe she shouldn't have stopped dancing. If nothing else, it had been a nice distraction. Although, she was sure the matriarchs would have made a mental note of each of her partners.

She could already see it. In the weeks to come, there would be rumors of the men she'd been dancing with and the number of times they'd danced and how, surely, there would be another wedding soon because everyone had seen the way the two of them – the him would change depending on who was doing the gossiping – had looked at each other.

Jane closed her eyes.

What she wouldn't give for a nap.

Or another drink.

"A beautiful lass such as yourself shouldn't be hiding in the background."

It took Jane a moment to recognize the person was speaking to her, and even once she did, she didn't open her eyes. "You must be mistaken. The bride is over there." She waved a hand in the general direction of the gathering. "She's much lovelier than me."

"A questionable statement, at best."

Cracking an eye, she took in the man before her. He was smiling good-naturedly but didn't seem familiar, which meant he must have been from one of the visiting clans. "Have you even seen her?"

"There's no need." Jane stared at him skeptically. While she couldn't be considered plain, all the extra attention paid to Mariam had left her beyond compare. A blind man could have seen her radiance. "Would you care to dance?"

Clearly, he was neither thrown by her look nor dissuaded.

Jane briefly considered denying the man completely and rejoining the celebration, but the idea of engaging in small talk with Ailean was even less appealing than entertaining a stranger. Not to
mention, if she reentered the festivities, there was the chance she'd be asked to dance again, and her
feet couldn't handle another potential MacBryde.

She eyed his proffered hand for a moment. "I don't believe I caught your name."

"Bern Darroch."

There wasn't anything blatantly off about the name, yet it brought Jane up short. "Darroch?" When
he gave a disarming smile and nod, she smiled thinly in return and turned to the side. "Interesting."

Keeping him at the edge of her sight at all times, she slowly meandered her way around the tree and
farther from the celebrations while he shadowed her every step. It wasn't until they were, for the most
part, out of sight that she spoke again.

"I'm quite familiar with all of the Darrochs around here, but I can't say I've ever had the pleasure of
meeting a Bern Darroch."

She managed to sound casually unassuming even as her fingers slipped through the slit in the bottom
of her pocket to deftly undo the bindings that held a dagger against her outer thigh.

"In fact, I know for certain that the only Bern among them was a child that passed last winter, which
means that you…"

The small blade slipped free.

"Are an imposter."

In one fluid motion, she ripped the dagger from her pocket and turned to slash at the man's face only
for him to firmly catch her wrist. Gritting her teeth, she aimed a punch at his ribs with her other hand,
but he caught that wrist as well. Her chest tightened uncomfortably even as her mind worked to
formulate a plan.

Jane glanced from her right hand to her left hand to his unsettling smile before making her move, but
when she attempted to knee him, he side-stepped, pulled her off balance, and swung her around to
push her against the tree. The impact knocked the breath from her lungs. She was still dazed and
gasping when he smoothly transferred both of her wrists to one hand overhead, pressed the other
over her mouth, and stepped forward to effectively trap her with his body.

The loss of any obvious escape routes ignited her natural fight or flight instinct.

Jane violently thrashed against him, not even pausing when she inadvertently hit her head against the
trunk a couple times. However, struggling did nothing but make him chuckle and tighten his grip, the
bones of her wrist grinding painfully together. He leaned closer, face inches away from hers, and she
absentmindedly lamented her earlier decision to handle the situation without disrupting the wedding.

"Stop moving."

She contemplated trying to bite off one of his fingers instead.

"Be still."

Could he see the proof of her alarm as it pounded a racing rhythm against the wall of her throat?
Could he hear the fright in her rapid breathing, her exhales puffing over the top of the hand still
pressed firmly over her mouth?
"I am not here to harm you, Jane."

The world screeched to a halt at the name she'd left in England. Her body was still tense, quivering with the adrenaline rushing through her veins, but she willed herself to stop fighting and pushed away the threads of common sense that insisted she resist him.

When she went still, his smile widened. "Do you promise not to scream?"

The teasing edge to his voice made her eyes narrow as she leveled him with her very best glare. Her defiant expression might as well have been a love-struck one, though, for all the good it did. Chuckling, he slowly eased the hand away from her mouth. She was still held captive, trapped between his body and the tree, but just being able to open her mouth gave her some relief.

Music and laughter sounded in the background as the merriment continued. They would hear her if she screamed. They would come after her. The man might cut her throat with the dagger still clenched in her fist before they got there, but the highlanders wouldn't allow him to escape with his life. In the end, it all boiled down to conviction.

Could she trust a complete stranger to keep to his word and not harm her?

But at the same time…

*How* could she trust a complete stranger, one who’d lied about his identity and pinned her to a tree against her will, to keep to his word and not harm her?

Although, technically, she'd been the one to strike first. And throw the first punch. And try to take him down with a knee to his groin. Maybe it was better if she didn't think too hard about it. The list of affronts was somewhat skewed in his favor.

Jane opened her mouth and watched his eyes harden as he read the intent in hers. Then she paused, swallowed her scream, and quietly demanded. "Who are you?" The responding grin made her inherently nervous.

"You mean you don't recognize me?"

Frowning, she took him in. Blonde hair, scruffy beard, blue eyes, thick build… no, he wasn't any more familiar now than he was when she first saw him. But then she was doing a double take as the features flickered.

It was like watching something in slow motion. Obsidian bled into the golden locks, the facial hair receded before disappearing entirely, and wisps of grey and green chased away all traces of blue from the eyes. And when the tartan wool grew indistinct and shimmered into strong, clean lines of black and green, she was left staring at an annoyingly familiar God of Mischief.

"Loki." She exhaled a sharp sigh. "I should have known."

It had been a while since she'd seen him – ten, maybe twelve years – but he wasn't someone who was easily forgotten.

"It's good to see you too, Jane."

Pursing her lips at the greeting, she looked pointedly up to where he still held her wrists above her head. When he didn't move, she contemptuously arched an eyebrow. A few seconds passed by. Then a few more before he finally released her and stepped back.
"One of these days, we'll be able to greet each other without you trying to kill me."

Jane didn't move away from the tree, just collapsed back against it as she restored the dagger to its position at her thigh, idly rubbed her wrists, and shot him a look he coolly ignored in favor of watching the celebrations behind her. "I haven't tried to kill you every time."

Tilting his head, attention following what she assumed to be a dancing couple in the distance, he offhandedly refuted her statement. "The first time we met, you were prepared to fight me with your sword."

"You appeared in the middle of a battleground. I was traumatized by everything that had just happened." She resolutely pushed aside both the memory and the dull ache it caused even to this day.

"And the time you endeavored to push me out the window?"

"Elizabeth was coming up the stairs. If she'd seen you, the entire city would have heard her screaming. And anyway, you didn't fall. Even if you had, it wasn't that far of a drop. I highly doubt you would've died." At the last moment, he'd disappeared, leaving Jane to topple to the floor and explain why she was sprawled on the ground to a confused Elizabeth.

"What about the instance where you threw a dagger at my chest?"

"It's not exactly normal for a person to suddenly be at the foot of my bed in the middle of the night. I was startled and reacted accordingly." As frightening as it had been, she was at least thankful he hadn't been wearing his helmet. Between the darkness and the horns, Loki would've looked like the devil himself.

"And now you try to slit my throat."

"How was I supposed to know that was you? When an unfamiliar man approaches me and is caught in a lie, I tend to think it better to act first and question later, especially considering the sore relations between the clans." It hadn't taken her long to learn of the bad blood between some of the highlanders. "Perhaps next time you will think twice before taking on the appearance of someone else."

Jane watched the beginnings of a smirk play at his mouth and thought about pointing out that he'd only named four examples, but remembering there were quite a few more he could mention, she decided to remain silent. Then again, the annoyingly mischievous look in his eyes when he glanced away from the wedding and back to her made her think he was just as aware of that fact as she.

"You are full of rationalizations, Jane."

She abandoned rubbing at her wrists to throw up her hands in frustration instead. "I wouldn't have a need to justify anything if you didn't simply appear whenever the mood struck you." Letting her head fall back against the rough bark of the tree, she rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger. "Why do you even come to me?"

"I am, by nature, curious."

She breathed an unamused laugh and muttered to herself. "I don't believe that for a moment." Although that wasn't completely true. She believed he was curious, just not that his inquisitiveness was the sole reason for visiting. "Is there no one else you can observe and bother?"

"Mortals do not interest me."
"I am human…" Peeking at him from beneath her lashes, she saw that he'd stepped closer while her eyes were closed. "In case you've forgotten."

"Human, yes. Mortal, no." As if she needed the reminder. "I have no interest in watching mortal humans muddle their way through Midgard." He stepped even closer, the measured action making her eyes open completely. "However, I do find it interesting to watch an immortal human work her way through the ages of the world."

The realization that something wasn't right had come to Jane slowly. She'd lived with Elizabeth and her family for almost thirteen years after arriving in England, and during that time, she never felt or acted any differently. Really, the lack of change wasn't something she even noticed. In the end, Elizabeth had been the first to mention it.

"Your hair is as beautiful as ever, Jane." The brush slid smoothly through the wavy strands. "Aunt Isabell's is already spattered with grey, but yours remains as pure as the first day I saw you. No wrinkles, either." She set the brush down and sighed winsomely. "I can only hope to look so youthful when I am the same age."

Not two years after that, Jane had left. No explanations, no goodbyes… just packed her belongings and disappeared into the London crowd. It wasn't until she'd been required to do the same thing to two more families that Loki finally explained the truth of what happened to her.

Needless to say, she hadn't taken the news well.

Crossing her arms, she stared unseeingly at the grass between their feet, listening to the merriment. The current song came to a close, and in the momentary silence before the next one began, she heard everyone laugh uproariously as old man Lucas loudly – and probably drunkenly – finished telling a story. Then the music picked back up, and Jane could almost visualize Malcolm grabbing hold of Mariam and spinning her around to the upbeat tempo.

Malcolm would be holding his new wife close, smiling down at her. Mariam would be reveling in their moment of happiness, laughing as her husband twirled her. Their parents would be watching them cheerfully, already imagining their future grandchildren. The rest of the townsfolk would be, if nothing else, grateful for the chance to celebrate.

Completely normal, every single one of them.

And then there was Jane.

Jane who had made a fool of herself learning the ways and customs of the Scots. Jane who had shared a room with Mariam for the past six years. Jane who had beamed as she watched the ceremony uniting the couple.

Jane who had slipped almost seamlessly into the highlanders' lives.

Jane who would slip almost seamlessly out.

Another bout of laughter cut through the music. This time, though, Jane turned. Keeping her body hidden behind the tree, she leaned over just enough to peer around. It was exactly as she'd imagined: Malcolm and Mariam dancing while everyone smiled, laughed, lived around them.

Jane fingered the bark beneath her hands. "Sometimes I wish you hadn't found it so fascinating." Because although she was alive, at the same time, she wasn't. Not really.

"You ate the apple of your own accord, Jane."
It was the bitter truth. He'd only required her to take the apple. Afterwards, she could have tossed it aside, thrown it overboard, pawned it off on someone else. She didn't have to eat it. However, just because it was the truth, that didn't make it right.

"But I did so without knowing the consequences."

A lie by omission was still a lie.

Loki was silent for so long she thought he'd left, but then his voice came softly, pensively. "Do you regret it?"

Her eyes drifted, focused on the willow tree and its draping branches that stirred in the breeze. She rolled the answer around in her mouth, testing its candor, before she replied. "Yes." Then, her attention moved back to the people. "Life is only precious because it ends. When you live forever, what's special about it? What is there to live for?"

"I've told you before… you can die the same as anyone else, just not by the hands of time."

Brows pulled together in a frown, she turned to face him, taking in his carefully guarded expression. "That's even worse. Because of your curiosity, I am left with only three options: death at the hands of someone else, death by my own hand, or an eternity of leaving those I care for behind."

It wasn't the most appealing of choices.

Death by anyone's hands, including her own, wasn't what she wanted. There was something drastically different between being willing to meet death head-on and going through life seeking it out. Therefore, saying goodbye was all that remained.

Over and over, she'd left people, forged new friendships and relationships, and left again, a continuously tragic cycle. Time worked to numb the pain, building a scar over that place in her heart that had been repeatedly scored when she turned her back, but while leaving had grown easier over time, it was never exactly easy. Even if she was immortal, she was still human at heart.

"Do you desire an apology for my giving you the apple?"

The question made her stop and blink before she arched a brow. "Would you give me one if I asked?"

His blank expression pulled away just enough to reveal a smirk. "No."

"I figured as much." She sighed. Then her lips turned upwards in a mirror image of Loki's – there was little use in dwelling on things she couldn't change – and she chuckled. "I doubt I'd believe you if you did."

Between their slight smiles, the gravity of the moment dissipated and Jane was left feeling strangely… complacent. She leaned against the tree again, watching Loki, following his progress as he took a couple steps to the left and looked at the rolling hills of the Highlands, then a couple steps to the right and looked at the dense forest line. Back and forth he went, all the while wending his way closer to her.

"This is a new setting." He reached out to touch one of the branches and rubbed his fingers together when they came away sticky with sap. "It is a pleasant change after the monotony of the last place you called home."

"London."
"Unimportant."

Jane shook her head, emotions falling somewhere between exasperation and amusement at his haughty tone. "It is nice. You should see it in autumn, though. The entire forest turns the color of fire, and the north winds make the leaves fall and coat the ground."

Pausing, she remembered how Mariam would help her pile the leaves together so the children could jump in them and the times they would walk the leaf-covered trails down to the brook.

"It is nothing compared to the splendor of the Realm Eternal."

"How would you know if you've never seen it?" Not that Loki ever seemed to admire much about her world anyway. He was more inclined to comment on the inferior quality of their structures than the beauty of the clear, night sky.

"It doesn't matter how exquisite it might be." Several leaves fell from the tree when he flicked the branch. "There is little that can hold a candle to the sights in Asgard."

Jane absently watched a few more leaves tumble over themselves to the ground. "Well, I think it's beautiful. It's a shame I have to leave soon."

The leaves ceased their falling, and Jane looked up to see Loki staring at her. "When?"

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "Probably before next spring."

Before today, the attention had been split somewhat evenly between Mariam and Jane, as far as their futures were concerned. However, with Mariam now married, the focus would fall solely on Jane. There would be comments about her still living at home, prodding about when she was getting married… eventual remarks on how she still looked exactly the same as when she'd first arrived. If Mariam was already noticing it, it would only be a matter of time before others did as well.

Yes, she'd have to leave within the year.

Loki's forehead knitted with an unusual look of bewilderment. "I don't know if I will ever understand your unfailing ability to grow attached to every person with whom you come into contact."

"Does that generalization also apply to you?"

If he heard her remark – even though she knew he did; nothing ever escaped his attention – he didn't respond to it. Instead, he moved to stand directly in front of her and pointed past the tree to the highlanders. "Those people are not your family."

"Loki, someday you'll realize there is more to being family than a mere bond of blood."

The perplexed expression faded to be replaced by a curled lip and a sneer. "A warm sentiment, but it will not prevent them from dying."

"That may be true, but my people are dead, in case you've forgotten." Anger had never been her vice, but this time she allowed a sliver of it to curl through her voice. "This clan, the next group, the one after that… they are my people now. Those I align myself with become the only family I have."

The heavy silence that welled up between them was a stark contrast to the light-hearted noises in the background. It hung thick and dense, a tangible thing. And as they stared at each other, Jane wondered if the sparks of pride and conviction in their eyes would ignite the air.
"Eventually, you will come to realize it is easier to forego emotional attachments."

Jane issued a wry smile. "We'll just have to agree to disagree on that. It may be hard to leave people, but the idea of living through year after year with no companions is..." She trailed off. There were no words that could properly describe the bleakness of an eternity spent alone, the hollowness of it.

"I wonder how many times you will endure saying goodbye." That curiosity he'd spoken of played in the depths of his eyes as he studied her intently.

"As many as I have to, I suppose."

They descended into another bout of silence, each of them regarding the other. In the quiet, the world seemed to condense and narrow around them, and as her eyes flicked back and forth between his, she distantly wondered if the slightly cruel edge to his mischievousness was a natural tendency or a product of his surroundings.

It was likely she'd never know. Loki was notoriously guarded when it came to revealing information, which meant she knew next to nothing about him. She knew he was, more or less, a god and resided in a world called Asgard, a distinct realm apart from her own. She knew he was somewhere around twelve hundred years old, which was just as staggering to think of now as it was when she first found out. She knew that, unlike the majority of his people, he had an aptitude for magic. But he remained silent about the truly important things.

What had made him appear in the wreckage all those years ago?

Why had he healed her?

What was the real reason behind his continued visits?

Why had he given her the apple?

Jane tried not to dwell on the questions too much. There was no doubt they were all connected in some way, but the lack of answers would run circles through her mind and only ended up giving her a headache. Still, she knew there was more to his motivations than mere curiosity, no matter what he said.

If she played the situation right, he might eventually reveal things to her. It hadn't taken long for her to learn that yelling and anger didn't faze him. The time she'd demanded answers about why he'd given her the apple and cursed her with immortality, he'd snidely remarked that every decision comes with a price and disappeared for almost thirty years. Since then, what little she knew had been found out through calm interactions and carefully worded questions.

Not that he was ever unaware of what she was trying to do. He was far too skilled in reading people – or maybe it was just her – to be played. So, if she were to follow that line of thought, that meant any information she'd worked from him had been freely given and, in reality, he was playing her. Regardless, she still desperately wanted to know his reasoning. A person didn't just show up, heal someone, and then curse them with immortality for the fun of it.

Hopefully...

And now she had a headache.

"Edana!"

Loki didn't react to the shout. The name was nothing to him. Jane, however, automatically
responded, spinning around so quickly that she almost knocked him with her elbow – when had he gotten so close? – and peeked around the tree.

"I'm assuming that means something to you." There was a dry edge to his voice, but whether it was because she wasn't paying attention to him any longer or because she'd nearly hit him, she didn't know.

Through the crowd of people, she could just see Mariam craning her neck, searching for Jane. She'd been gone for too long. Her absence had been noted. When she called out again, a few more started to look around, and Jane turned back to Loki.

"I have to go. They're looking for me."

"Edana?"

"It's my name here. You can't expect Jane Foster to fit in every country."

He opened his mouth to say something, but she was already moving away from him, easing her way around the tree and stepping carefully over the roots. As soon as she was out in the open, the highlanders noticed her, and Mariam enthusiastically waved her over.

Jane spared one more glance for Loki, still hidden behind the girth of the tree. "Next time, skip the guise and show up as yourself. If you do, I promise not to try and kill you."

"Try being the key word." But then he gave her an imperious look. "You're so certain I'll return?"

"You always do," Grinning at him, she gathered her skirts in one hand and began to make her way back to party, calling back to him over her shoulder. "Besides, you were the one that said it was curiosity that keeps you coming here to visit me. Aren't you curious as to what I'll be doing in fifteen years?"

She never looked back to the tree, but the low chuckle she'd heard as she walked away stayed with her for the rest of the evening. And the following evening. And the evening after that. It stayed with her for pretty much every evening… until he appeared to her fifteen years later to the day.

Chapter End Notes

Just a fun history fact – when Mariam is talking about naming her firstborn son William, that’s a direct reference to William Wallace who would eventually become one of the leaders during the wars for Scottish independence in the late thirteenth century. Also, some of you might recognize him as the main character from the movie Braveheart.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

While writing this, I realized I keep making Christians out to be the bad guys. In reality, I'm just trying to portray these moments in history as they really were, so I hope no one is getting offended. This should be the last one to deal with any sort of religiously-centered dispute.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three

"The wolves are on the prowl – can you smell the blood? Today the sky will fall."

1349: The Free City of Strasbourg

"It's infested."

"The work of the Jews, no doubt. Their sins are polluting the town."

"More of them arrived just the other day."

"They carry death with them. Something must be done before they bring God's wrath upon us all."

"What should we do?"

The fine hairs on the muzzle of the horse tickled Jane's palm as he sought the carrot she held, but she barely noticed. Reaching up, she distractedly scratched the white line that ran between his eyes and gripped the harness a little more firmly with her other hand when he shifted, lowering his head to affectionately bump against her chest.

For all intents and purposes, she was doing nothing more than handle the horse as Christoph tended to his swollen hock. In reality, she was actively listening to the group of citizens that had gathered around the city well, their voices and the malcontent they held carrying easily across the courtyard.

Strasbourg was restless…

Another horse lumbered by and crossed her line of sight, pulling a cart loaded with planks from the saw mill. When it hit a hole in the cobblestones, the timbers cracked and shuddered loudly, making the horse in her hands jerk and side-step nervously. Jane quickly regained her hold on the animal, but not before his skittering knocked Christoph from the upturned bucket.

"Josefine, if you cannot pay attention, what use are you to me? I do not pay you to daydream and pet
horses. Now hold him steady." He continued to grumble under his breath while he righted his makeshift stool.

The truth was that Christoph paid her very little, far less even than the other women who worked for him. Still, sewing new clothing to be sold to the general populace and, on rare occasion, to the nobles at the higher end of society was far easier than her stint harvesting hay, and her wages were just enough to provide the necessities. She had a roof over her head, a fire to stave off the cold winter, and food to eat, which was more than she could say for a great number of the people she'd seen sleeping on the streets when she'd passed through certain areas of France.

So instead of making a comment, Jane bit her tongue and walked the horse in a wide circle to calm him down, eventually bringing him back around to Christoph. Satisfied, he went back to wrapping the hock while she focused more carefully on the task at hand instead of the shouts from the well. She couldn't afford to let the horse get away from her again. If she did, Christoph would most likely send her home without pay.

"They're working themselves into a fury."

Jane glanced over her shoulder to the voice behind her and then to the well. "Again." As the man stepped up beside her, she turned back to the horse. "It happens almost daily now."

"It's to be expected." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod. "Without the power of the town council to protect them, I suspect the city will rise up against the Jews any day now."

The unease had been steadily growing among the people as the pestilence spread throughout the land. There were rumors… dreadful stories of entire cities laid to waste, the people overtaken by a disease that caused them to vomit blood and covered their body in tumors that oozed death.

In the beginning, those rumors had only been the faint whisperings of fear when news of the tragedies that plagued other towns reached Strasbourg's ears by those traveling the trade routes. But all traces of those hushed discussions were over. With most everyone having seen at least some proof of the sickness, it didn't matter that the disease hadn't reached Strasbourg yet.

Originally, the populace's discontent was a weakly burning flame, something that could be contained.

Now, it was a towering pyre, one that demanded a sacrifice.

It had only been a few days, but there were times Jane could still hear the council members yelling as the rioting citizens pulled them from the parliament building. In the end, their stalwart defense of the Jews' innocence in the face of all the accusations had been their undoing. And the new town council was not nearly as understanding as their predecessors. Since they'd been placed in power, Jane had watched groups of Jews disappear into the town prisons and not come out.

Fear, it seemed, had become a dark knight that held the citizens of Strasbourg in his iron fist and pointed his warped blade of justice at the Jews.

Jane spared another glance for the horde. A man had stepped onto the rock that lined the well and alternated between pointing into its depths and gesturing to the far side of the city where the majority of the Jewish population resided. When he made a violent slashing motion across his throat, the mob screamed in support.

"I'm beginning to fear the same thing."

"Heinrich!" Christoph's voice put an abrupt end to their conversation as Jane immediately snapped to
attention, head whipping back around to face the horse and hands tightening on the harness.

The man at her side, however, moved slowly, casually crossing behind her and extending his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. "Christoph!" Bravado was laced thick through his voice. "How are you, old friend?"

"I'm not your friend. And I'd be a lot better if my girls would actually get some work done." The last few words were yelled over his shoulder to the faces that had appeared in the windows of the shop at the sound of Heinrich's voice. "I swear, Heinrich, if you don't stop distracting my girls…"

"My apologies, Christoph." To his credit Heinrich didn't even appear to be fazed by the other man's impressive glare. "Considering your rather beautiful worker here has repeatedly denied my attempts at courtship, I was unaware my presence would have any effect on her whatsoever." He deliberately stepped between Jane and Christoph, and her eyes automatically came up to meet his. "Am I distracting you, my lady?"

But before Jane could do anything more than sternly shake her head at him – if he caused her to get sent home without pay, she'd hurt him herself – Heinrich yelped and moved away, carefully stepping over the bucket that Christoph had thrown at him as he rubbed his lower back.

"There's no need to resort to violence."

"I told you to stop distracting my girls! And she's not the only one I'm talking about, either." Jane tried not to stare at the confrontation but failed miserably when Christoph pointed at her. Apparently, she wasn't the only one that failed. The windows had once again filled with the rest of the seamstresses.

Heinrich borderline whined. "That's still not a valid reason to—"

"I said, get back to work!" The faces immediately disappeared, and Jane bit her lip to keep from smiling at the redness spreading across Christoph's face. "I'm going to make sure those empty-headed women are doing their job, and when I get back, you…” He poked Heinrich in the chest. "Better be gone."

With an annoyed grunt, Christoph stomped towards the building, leaving a grinning Heinrich in his wake. Jane, who'd been discreetly watching his retreat around the horse's face, jumped when he called back to her.

"Josefine, put the horse up and go fetch some water." Then he vanished into the structure.

Breathing a quiet sigh to ease some of the tension she felt, Jane led the horse to the stable. Having grown up together, Heinrich always knew exactly how to push Christoph's buttons. But while it was, without a doubt, amusing to watch, the confrontation between the two men only made her think of the unrest in the city.

"He's turned into quite the unpleasant fellow over the years, hasn't he?"

"I couldn't say. He's been that way since I first arrived." Closing the stable door, she grabbed the water bucket and began to make her way to the well. Thankfully, at some point during her preoccupation with Christoph and Heinrich, the mob had dispersed.

"Well, I can certainly vouch that he wasn't always... how he is now." Heinrich fell into step beside her. "But then, the times have grown dark as of late."

Considering how things had regressed just within Strasbourg, Jane could only imagine how gross an
understatement that probably was in regards to the surrounding countries. "I take it things haven't looked promising in your travels?"

"No, they haven't."

Heinrich was notoriously well-traveled, his business dealings often carrying him from one country to another. He'd been from the southernmost point of Italy to the western shores of Spain and up to England. One day, he'd even regaled her with a harrowing journey into Russia. So the implication that the state of affairs was dismal everywhere else only confirmed her thoughts.

They were silent the rest of the walk to the well, but once they reached it and she prepared to draw a bucketful of water, his hand darted out to touch her forearm.

"Josefine…" Startled, her eyes darted to his, and as quickly as he'd reached out to her, he pulled away. He seemed so unsure, the swagger so common with him melting away into something far more real. "You need to leave this place. I don't say it simply out of a desire for your company but out of a genuine concern for your well-being. Something is about to happen. I can feel it."

It would be a lie if Jane said she wasn't surprised by his request. Despite how often Heinrich had shown an interest in her, she'd always been more inclined to write it off as playful flirtation and friendship. But personal interest aside, she knew he was right. Even though Strasbourg had yet to be consumed by the pestilence, it was already being consumed from within by its own people and their fearful rage.

"The rest of the land is in chaos. I wouldn't have you caught up in that when it arrives."

The use of *when* instead of *if* wasn't comforting in the least. Instead, Jane felt something ominous settle in the pit of her stomach. "If everything is as bad as you say, where would we go?"

"North." Heinrich broke their gaze to watch another man approach the well but continued talking, albeit softer. "It would be dangerous to make our way back through France, but if we can get to the English Channel, we can make it safely to Iceland."

Deep in thought, Jane picked at the metal rim of the bucket. She had no qualms about leaving Strasbourg. It was one of the few places where she hadn't forged any real emotional ties, which meant there was little that incited her to remain. But to journey back through France… things had been starting to disintegrate when she'd passed through two years before. Travelling through the country now would be to willingly court death.

Her immortality would do nothing to stave off disease.

But what other choice did they have?

The other man drew closer, and unwilling to be heard, Jane turned her back to the well and tried to appear casual as she stared back at the stable. Rumors of sickness weren't the only thing that had been reaching Strasbourg. It was one of the few places where she hadn't forged any real emotional ties, which meant there was little that incited her to remain. But to journey back through France… things had been starting to disintegrate when she'd passed through two years before. Travelling through the country now would be to willingly court death.

Jane whispered under her breath. "When would you leave?"

"As soon as possible. My men are ready. They wait only for my word."

Heinrich spoke just as quietly, and she found herself wondering again at what all he'd witnessed. Had he seen people trying to escape only to be killed? Had he seen the sick houses that contained
those succumbing to the spreading death? Had he seen the purported mountains of bodies piled outside town walls or the massive graves in which they were half-heartedly buried? Had he seen the scavenging animals dig the bodies from their shallow tombs to gnaw on the remains?

She was still contemplating her reply when the sound of footsteps stopped behind her.

"And what are you two doing loitering about the well? Seeing how your bucket's still empty, you're clearly not here to fetch water. I know you weren't tampering with the well."

Heinrich's eyes briefly flicked to hers. There was an edge to the man's voice, the last statement coming out in a dangerously suggestive drawl, but Jane turned to face the newcomer. Wendelin. The same man who had been stirring the mob into an uproar earlier. Immediately, a placation was on the tip of her tongue.

"I assure you, sir, we're only here to retrieve some water for Christoph, but while here, we became distracted with what your group was discussing earlier. We saw the gathering but were unable to join you. Is there any news from the council?"

She spoke smoothly, reassuringly. At some point in the past three centuries – between concocting stories of her heritage, her family, her very existence – Jane had learned to lie quite convincingly. However, her skills at deception could have been barely meager and it wouldn't have made much difference. The thought of bringing in more supporters to his crusade apparently made Wendelin willing to accept any excuse.

He nodded, face darkening at the topic. "Yes, I heard the council has taken more than one thousand Jews into custody. They're to be questioned."

"Questioned?"

"Have you not heard, girl?" The man eyed both Jane and Heinrich suspiciously for a moment but continued. "They're conspiring to put an end to the rest of us."

Lifting his chin to the left, he indicated to a group of Jewish women on the far side of the courtyard. Even across the distance, Jane could see their anxiety. Eyes trained on the ground, heads lowered, shoulders hunched in trepidation… they clung to the shadows next to the buildings as they discreetly made their way home.

"The Jews have been poisoning the wells in all the cities around here. It's only a matter of time before they begin to poison our water supply as well so they can watch us die."

It was a ridiculous notion. What sense would there be in the Jews poisoning the water if they had to drink from it also? Poison was poison, deadly to anyone and everyone that consumed it. They wouldn't be immune to its effects.

A motion caught Jane's attention, and her focus darted from Wendelin to a couple rats that scurried across the cobblestones. The rapid growth of the towns over the past few years had attracted the rodents, which were now nearly as plentiful as the humans, if not more so. They lived, scavenged, and bred among them, their population growing ever larger, and there was little anyone could do about it.

Fighting a disgusted grimace, she watched them disappear into the larders of a distant house. It wasn't the first time she'd had the idea that maybe – just maybe – the rats were more at fault for the spreading sickness than any believed immorality or religious bigotry. After all, they were literally everywhere. But it only took being scoffed at once by several of the townsfolk for her to keep the
idea to herself.

Still…

"All the new law keepers need is a confession for them to face the consequences of their sins."

Expression twisted in loathing, he spat in the well. "Filthy Jews." Then he turned on his heel and stalked off.

Jane silently watched Wendelin disappear into the crowd before leaning over the edge of the well. The reflection of the sky outlined her dark silhouette in the water below. She didn't know how to explain it, but she just knew the epidemic wasn't caused by anything humans had done, be it poison or sin. The only thing dirty about the water in the well was the spittle that floated on the surface, spewed from a prejudiced and intolerant mouth.

"Will you come with me, Josefine?"

The bubbles popped and disappeared, but the sentiment behind it remained. It festered, spread, devoured. The entire city was infected with it. She needed to leave.

"Yes."

Heinrich gave a curt nod of approval. "I'll give you the night to pack your belongings. We leave in the morning."

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One of Jane's earliest memories was of her mother. It was indistinct, fuzzy from years of other memories piled on top of it, but she didn't need images to remember the hundreds of other details that comprised the moment.

*The room spun around her as she bolted upright with a yell, heart racing with fear and hand clutching at her chest. Immediately, her mother was there, the cot dipping with her weight as she pulled her into an embrace. She sat there and listened to her mother's slow, steady heartbeat until her own heart calmed to match it. Only then, did she become aware of the murmured words and the comforting hand that gently stroked her hair.*

"There is nothing to fear. The dreams are just dreams. They cannot harm you, nor can the darkness of the night. Never fear the night."

Gradually, her muscles relaxed, and as the tension seeped away, it left her boneless and sagging against her mother. Never ending the embrace, they stretched out on the cot. A piece of straw poked at her back through the fabric beneath them, but she didn't even care, just listened to her mother repeat the phrases over and over.

"There is nothing to fear. The dreams are just dreams. They cannot harm you, nor can the darkness of the night. Never fear the night."

The wind howled beyond the dwelling while the wooden beams creaked under its force, but the fire in the hearth crackled merrily. Its heat spread out to warm her face, and by its dim light, she stared up at the crisscross pattern of the thatching overhead. Fingers began to comb through her hair once more. Closing her eyes, she fingered the heavy wool blanket.
"There is nothing to fear. The dreams are just dreams. They cannot harm you, nor can the darkness of the night. Never fear the night."

They breathed in time with each other – rise and fall, rise and fall – and she mouthed the words.

"Never fear the night."

It was funny, in an ironic sort of way, how similar her first and last memories of her mother were. They were both in the same dwelling with the crosshatch roof and the cot that was her bed. They were both accompanied by the same sound of winter wind and popping fire. They were both set to the same words. Only, when Jane pressed her ear to her mother's chest that last time, she'd listened to the slow, steady heartbeat that had calmed her countless times through the years slow… and falter… and stop.

On her deathbed, her mother had told Jane to never fear the night because, after all, the dark was only caused by an absence of light. And that thought usually helped her when the weight of the past came up to haunt her.

But during that last night in Strasbourg, the dark churned with terrors.

All through the night, Jane tossed and turned as sleep eluded her. And the few times she did manage to fall asleep, she was immediately woken by nightmares that left her drenched in sweat. They were terrible things, full of fire and screaming and a weight so heavy it stole her breath. But as frightening as the nightmares were, wakefulness wasn't much better. Not when the silence of the night was torn apart by the intermittent screams of the tortured Jews.

The cries brought back raw memories, images and sounds cutting through her and ripping at her heart. Usually, she'd draw on the companionship of those around her to push away the past, but here in Strasbourg, she was alone. And being alone only made the pain of the past that much stronger.

There was blood-stained grass and the flashing edge of a sword and the wet sound of cleaved skin and a limp hand in hers, and all she could think was that three hundred hears hadn't changed the world in the slightest and that mankind could still be so very ugly.

So Jane laid there in the dark, unwilling to sleep and face the nightmares yet unwilling to remain awake and face the screams. She placed the pillow across her face, pressing the ends firmly to her ears to try and block the sound. Then, with her breath hot and moist in the narrow space, she whispered to herself.

"Never fear the night."

"Never fear the night."

"Never fear the night."

And if she truly concentrated, she could almost feel the soothing motion of fingers through her hair.

When the sky began to lighten with the first hint of dawn, Jane had never felt more relieved.

The covers were thrown aside haphazardly, and she stoked the fire to chase away the chill in the
room before moving to the window to watch the coming daybreak. She was to meet Heinrich at the city gates when the sun had fully risen, which meant there was still time to waste. Nevertheless, she dressed quickly and attempted to tame her hair into something presentable, although those efforts were abandoned in favor of plaiting it into one, long braid when the curls refused to cooperate.

She'd just finished gathering the last of her things and had begun to tie the tails of her makeshift rucksack when she spied a movement in the shadowed corner of the room. Her hands faltered slightly, the fabric slipping through her fingers, but she resumed the task without looking up. She didn't have to. She knew who it was.

"What are you doing here?"

The shadows stirred, and out of the roiling stepped a familiar figure. Even in her peripheral vision, Loki was unmistakable. "I would think that fairly obvious. I'm certainly not here to admire the décor."

He moved to the small table in the corner, trailing a finger across the footboard of the bed as he went. She didn't respond, though. Instead, she silently looped the last ties of the rucksack into a knot and listened to him fiddle with the dishes on the table. When she finally straightened, he was holding her teapot and staring at her with an inquisitive expression.

"Are you well, Jane?"

The restless night had left her feeling bland, something Loki was clearly able to pick up on, but she was unwilling to discuss the particulars of why she'd been up all night with him. "What makes you ask that?"

"You seem… off." Lip curling, he glanced out the window. "Not to mention Midgard reeks of illness."

With a sigh, she dropped the pack by the door and began to straighten the bedcovers. "If you're wondering if I'm sick, the answer is no." Not yet, anyway. "Even if I was, I don't see why that would matter to you."

"In all honesty, it doesn't." Her eyes flicked to his, then rolled at the hint of a smirk pulling at his mouth. "But if you were to join the ranks of the dead, this realm would become significantly less interesting. As it is, the vast majority of it is dull."

Jane wasn't quite sure whether to be annoyed by his combined presence and backhanded compliments or grateful for the opportunity to focus on something else in the hopes that the lingering images in the back of her mind would disappear. In the end, she decided on neither and settled for indifference.

"Well, I'm sorry to say this, but I don't have time to entertain you today." A bright sliver of light cracked the edge of the horizon. Before long, the sun would be completely up, which meant she needed to start making her way to the gates.

With one last look at the room – she deliberately let her attention slide over Loki without focusing on him – she crossed over to the door and reached down for her rucksack. But just as she was getting ready to throw it over her shoulder, the church bell tolled and startled her so much that she dropped it with a thump, instantly looking to the window.

It was too early for any type of service to be held at the church. That wouldn't be until later in the day. So if it wasn't to announce the beginning of a service, then the bell was meant to call the citizens
of Strasbourg to attention, which meant…

Jane wrenched open the door just as the first yells reached her ears. In the hallway, others made their way downstairs, some blearily and some with an excitement that made her apprehensive. She hesitated for only a moment before joining the stream of people. It wasn't until she'd exited the building that Jane remembered that she'd left both her belongings and Loki upstairs, but when she started to turn, a hand pressed to the middle of her back and urged her forward.

"Keep going."

Jane couldn't turn her head enough to catch more than a partial glimpse behind her, but apparently, Loki's voice was as unmistakable as the rest of him. There was no doubt it was him behind her.

"But I need to—"

"You need to not appear suspicious." Leaning forward, he spoke lowly in her ear as he steered them along. "If you leave now, you will only draw attention to yourself."

Part of her grudgingly admitted he was right, but another part called him a liar because if anything would draw attention to the pair of them, it would be Loki and his strange clothing. With a sharp motion, she whirled around, mouth already open and ready to chastise him for being a hypocrite, but it snapped closed when she came face to face with Heinrich.

She spluttered, taken aback. "Heinrich?" But his face twisted in a withering look that didn't belong to the man she knew.

"Please…" Heinrich might have been standing before her, but it was Loki's sarcastic voice coming from his mouth. In the future, she'd have to tell him not to take the form of people she knew. It was unsettling. "I don't think the rest of these mortals would take kindly to seeing me as I truly am." He spun her around and pushed her forward. "Now move."

They trailed along near the end of the crowd, passing through the city like a herd of cattle until they finally came to a stop in the main courtyard. With everyone in attendance, the bell pealed one more time before stopping, the air reverberating with its ringing sound. The mass of people effectively blocked her view, but Jane craned her neck anyway, trying to see the purpose for the gathering.

When she did, she almost wished she hadn't.

Between a woman's head and a man's shoulder, she was just able to make out a platform, the new leader of the city council standing in the forefront, and a horde of Jews tied up behind him. The councilman was speaking, but the particulars didn't register. Words filtered in through the noise around her.

Sin…

Poison…

Repercussions…

But all Jane could hear was blame, blame, blame.

As the man continued to speak, the people around her began to mutter among themselves. Soon, the mutters turned to talking and the talking turned to shouting and the shouting turned to wild cheering when another man appeared on the platform carrying a torch. The crowd surged, and Jane dimly felt Loki's hands steady her right before his chest pressed to her back when they were shoved together.
"They're trying to kill us!"

"God punishes the rest of the land for their transgressions!"

The vile statements filled the air while the mob pulsed with an energy that set her on edge and made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. The people were like rabid beasts, frothing at the mouth.

"Burn them!"

In a daze, Jane looked from person to person and saw nothing but panic. It wasn't hate that was driving them to act the way they were but a primal fear of the death coming for Strasbourg. The problem with fear was how quickly it could take hold and push away common sense, how quickly it could make people turn on others, how quickly it could make offering up an entire community of Jews seem like the logical action.

As the councilman stepped back, the man bearing the torch stepped forward and, one by one, lit the kindling beneath the stakes.

Her glimpses of the platform were interspersed, blocked by nodding heads and raised fists, but just the occasional view left her stunned and mute with horror. The flames rose to lick at the bound people, and Jane's hands rose with them, covering her mouth as she shook her head in disbelief.

Here, again, was the proof of how rotten people could be at the core, how wicked, and she absentmindedly wondered why anyone — mortal or immortal, human or god — would want to bear witness to it. Why was he even here? Why was she here? But then a different kind of scream began to pierce the air. And she wanted to turn and bury her face in Heinrich's chest but couldn't because it was Loki…

Her thoughts faltered.

_Loki._

Then they took hold again.

With difficulty, Jane began to turn. Her elbows dug into the ribs of the people around her in a bid for more space, but they didn't even notice, intent on watching the scene on the platform. Still, she managed to rotate until she was facing the Heinrich that was Loki. Ignoring the improper way they were pressed together, she stared up at him.

"Loki, help them." He blinked once, looked down at her, then blinked once more and looked back to the platform. "Save them!" She was yelling now, pleading, clutching at the shirt he wore. "I know you can save them, so save them!"

Later, she would realize the jeering shrieks of the crowd drowning out her words probably saved her life. With their current mentality, had any of them heard Jane wanted to save the Jews, they would've offered her up to be burned alive as well. At the time, though, she didn't care.

"Why won't you save them?" A hard jerk on the shirt brought Loki's attention back to her. "Why?"

"You know I do not meddle in the lives of mortals."

Jane's mouth fell open. He didn't want to meddle with mortals' lives. _Loki_ didn't want to meddle with people's lives. The hypocrisy, the insincerity, the absolute injustice of it burned at her, and before she could even second-guess her actions, she reached up and slapped him.
Instantly, her hand was caught in his crushing grip. It didn't matter that it was Heinrich's face she'd struck or Heinrich's hand that held her own. It was Loki's strength that threatened to pulverize the bones in her wrist.

"Careful, Jane."

And even though he sounded calm, the sinister warning in his voice was stark.

Over the past three centuries, Jane had begun to think of herself as a fairly intelligent person. Through careful observation and the occasional instruction, she was fluent in five languages and was probably more learned than any ladies who were allowed to attend studies. However, intelligence and wisdom were too very different things, something she demonstrated superbly when she continued yelling at Loki.

"No!" His chin lifted marginally, evidently unused to hearing the word. "You saw fit to meddle with my life! Why can't you do the same now?"

"That was different."

"No, it wasn't!" When she lifted her other hand to hit him, he arched an eyebrow, daring her to try. She settled for clenching her fingers into a trembling fist instead. "A life is a life, no matter if it's mine or theirs."

He watched her fist lower to her side before meeting her frustrated gaze with his own blank one. "What would you have me do, Jane? Don my armor and descend from the sky like the god all you humans believe me to be?" She swallowed hard, still unwilling to accept defeat. "I cannot save them without causing chaos."

"But how can you just stand there and do nothing?"

How could he do nothing when the screams were growing louder and the fire was burning hotter and the air was filling with the stench of burning flesh?

"Because I know not everyone can be saved. That's not how the realms operate." Releasing her hand, he broke their stare and lifted his head back to the platform. "You will learn that too... eventually."

Jane needed to do something.

She needed to scream. She needed to cry. She needed to sit down. She needed to run. She needed to live. She needed to die.

Something.

Anything.

But there was nothing she could do to help the people burning on the platform without ensuring her own death in the process, and there was nothing Loki could do without meddling in their lives. And in some small, reluctant part of her brain, she recognized the truth of his words. It wouldn't be right for her to go through life picking and choosing who gets to live and who deserves to die simply based on where she lived at the time. Saving the Jews in Strasbourg wouldn't prevent another town from rioting against them as well, nor would it prevent the rest of the country from succumbing to the epidemic.

She couldn't play God.
Without warning, a sharp pain flashed through Jane's skull and sent tears to prick at her eyes. The suddenness of it took her by surprise, and she struggled to comprehend what was happening even as she felt herself fall to the ground. The cobblestones dug into her spine while someone stepped on the tips of her fingers, but it was the rancid breath in her face that gathered her attention.

"Around here, women don't strike men unless they wish to be struck back." The unfamiliar man tightened the fist he had twisted around her braid. "Do you fancy a slap across the face?"

Still grimacing with the pain, Jane did the most inane thing she possibly could have done in that moment: rear back and spit in the man's face.

With a low chuckle, he wiped it away. "Seems like you need to learn a few manners."

But before he could say anything else, before he could even move, a pale fist connected with his head, snapping it viciously to the side, his crouched body following closely as he fell from his previous position above her. He tumbled against the legs of the people around them, but they only stared at the exchange for a moment before rearranging themselves around his now unconscious form and resuming their cheering for the fiery spectacle that continued.

Wincing at the sore spot on the back of her head where the man had jerked her hair and cursing her stupidity for hitting Loki – at least in public, her mind snidely corrected – she looked up to her rescuer and was shocked to see Loki.

Not Loki disguised as Heinrich, but the real Loki.

Speechless, she stared at him, taking in the harsh frown he issued to the man beside her. It wasn't until he looked back to her and noticed her shock that his face slowly slid into a look of disbelief, realizing his charade had slipped. He was still dressed as Heinrich, but the body in the clothes was his, the features all his own. Confused, now, he glanced between his hands and her on the ground.

"Josefine!" Jane blinked and saw Heinrich once again, only this time, it was the real Heinrich, looking worried, anxious, and utterly perplexed as he pushed through the last few people to fall to his knees beside her. "Josefine, are you alright?" His hands grasped hers. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm…" Using him as leverage, she pulled herself to a seated position. "I'm fine."

"If you wish to leave, I suggest you do so now."

In unison, they both turned to Loki. The look of surprise was gone, replaced with a carefully-crafted blankness, but Jane could see the remnants of whatever had bothered him so much in the uncertain glint in his eyes. Heinrich, however, wasn't nearly as caught up in that glint as she. Instead, he was helping her to her feet and checking her over for any more scrapes or bruises while she stared at Loki.

"Thank you." The words came out softly, her voice a little breathier than expected.

Loki dipped his head in a shallow nod of acknowledgment. Then he stepped aside to allow them a path out. Unwilling to wait another second, Heinrich's hand found her upper arm and began to pull her away, leading her through the wild fray to the abandoned city gate nearby.

And just before Heinrich ushered her from Strasbourg, Jane turned around long enough to see Loki still standing where they'd left him, staring at her intently, a motionless force in the middle of an angry tempest.
History fact for this chapter – the citizens of Strasbourg were prepared to kill the roughly two thousand Jews that lived there at the time. They were arrested and forced into giving confessions about poisoning water supplies before they were sentenced to be burned at the stake on February 14, 1349. In the end, about half of the Jews were willing to be baptized and were allowed to live, but those that refused were killed. The people of Strasbourg did so thinking it would save them, but the plague struck regardless and ended up killing about sixteen thousand people.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Things get a little more interesting in this chapter; although, it’s more in the sense that we’re starting to get some bigger glimpses of the plot than outright action. If it’s action you’re craving, hold out for a couple more chapters.

The crack of a limb cut loudly through the silence of the afternoon.

Jane crouched by the waters’ edge, ignoring the way it soaked both her stockings and the hem of her dress as she stared hard at the set of bushes across the creek. Sweat beaded on her brow, a few drops trickling down, but she didn’t wipe them away.

A few seconds passed, a few minutes… but when nothing appeared or made any more noise, she returned to scrubbing the cloth with sand from the creek bed. The surrounding water darkened, quickly turning from clear to pink to red. It stained her hands crimson, but she wasn’t bothered. After all, for the first time in a while, the blood she was cleaning out of the cloth was the result of life, not death.

The life was that of Ananias and Eleanor’s first daughter, and how fitting that they had named the child Virginia after the land in which they lived.

Aside from the crescent moon bruises on her forearm where Eleanor had clasped it, the birth itself had been relatively easy, but Jane’s experience as a midwife – picked up during her time in Iceland – meant she didn’t get to enjoy the relieved celebrations that followed a successful delivery. Instead, she’d collected the afterbirth and buried it outside the town, wiped down the house, and gathered up the blood-soaked rags before making the trek down to the creek to clean them.

Grabbing another handful of sand, she scrubbed at a particularly persistent stain, and sullenly thought how there would be more washing blood from clothes in the future. This time, though, it would be that of death.

Reaching up, Jane used her sleeve to wipe the sweat from her forehead, pointedly ignoring the liquid that slipped through the growing hole in the fabric.
It wasn't the only hole that had developed in her garments, nor was she the only one who suffered from threadbare clothing or a hungry stomach. The colony was in need of supplies, but without word from England, they had no way of knowing when more would arrive. Despite the lack of interaction with their homeland, they'd continued, trying to manage on their own. Until a few especially rough months and even rougher negotiations with the natives had left them desperate, at least.

In the end, it had been decided that Governor White would return to England within a fortnight for help. However, while his departure would bring hope to the colonists, it would also leave them even more vulnerable to the perils of the new world. Between the wild animals and the different diseases and the natives and their general lack of provisions, they could only hope to survive until the governor's return.

Jane was still lost in thought when another snap came from the brush across the creek. The sound instantly caught her attention and put her on edge, and as much as she would've liked to write it off as a deer or some other animal, the fact that it had come from the same location had her thinking otherwise. She had yet to experience a hostile encounter with the natives, but the colonists had been warned often enough to keep their distance. Not even two months back, George Howe had been supposedly killed by one of the Indians while wandering by himself, serving to be the case in point.

But like a fool, she had come down to the creek alone.

And also like a fool, she remained by the water instead of returning to the settlement.

Then again, the thought of turning her back to the noise made her distinctly uncomfortable. If she was going to die, she'd prefer to do it facing the harbinger instead of running from it.

Her hands fell still as she eyed the dark greenery, squinting in the bright light of the midday sun. Around the small clearing where she crouched, the birds resumed their chirping, the creek trickled around her fingers, and the faint hint of a breeze stirred the treetops overhead. Just as before, nothing burst out of the vegetation. Everything seemed completely normal, aside from the uneasy shiver that made goosebumps prickle on her arms.

Focus still trained on the opposite bank, she wrung out the cloth and laid it beside her before reaching back to where she'd laid the rest of the bloodied materials. Without looking, she aimlessly searched for the pile. Grass, dirt, rock… her fingers met everything except the fabric. And she was about to look away from the bushes to find it when one of the rags fell into the creek directly in front of her.

Water splashed onto her face, and she frantically wiped at it even as she tipped sideways to land in the shallow water. Whatever had been in the bushes was quickly forgotten in favor of whirling around to face a presence Jane now clearly felt behind her. It was with sopping clothes, tangled hair, and a bloody rag caught around her torso that she was met with a smug grin.

"Hello, Jane."

"Damn it, Loki!" He stood on the bank, staring down at her with obvious amusement, and she countered with her very best glare as she got up and stepped out of the creek. "Do you have any idea how much you scared me?"

"Considering your reaction, yes."

"Was that you over there also?" She waved behind her in the general direction of the noise she'd been hearing.
Loki glanced past her briefly. "I can't say that it was."

Unsure whether to believe him or not, she gave him one last narrowed look and bent over to wring out her skirt. "Ugh…" Water pooled around her while bits of dirt fell from her clothes to land on the cloth she'd just cleaned and would now have to clean again. "Well, you sure know how to make an entrance. Most people would say hello instead of sneaking up on someone and throwing a dirty rag in front of them."

"I am not and have never been most people."

"Clearly."

Loki shadowed her when she moved farther up the bank and into the sun. "And I did say hello."

"Yes, after you…" Jane blinked. She had been planning on chastising him, but there really was no use. Knowing him, he'd only laugh at whatever she had to say. She shook her head and began to wring out her hair. "You know what, nevermind."

He laughed anyway. Not really a wholehearted laugh. More like… a chuckle? A snicker? A chortle? It was the kind of laugh that held a darker edge to it. Regardless, it was a sound of amusement. "Jane Foster, you never cease to be entertaining."

Feeling slightly disgruntled, she muttered. "I'm glad to know that you find enjoyment at my expense."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and ran her fingers through it, managing to tame it into something halfway presentable. However, her clothes left something to be desired. Not only were they wet, the bloody rag that had wrapped around her torso in the water had left a red smear on the fabric. Grumbling, she wiped at the blood, which only proceeded to spread it around and set the stain.

Jane regarded the crimson line beneath her bust. It wasn't that she considered herself elegant. Truthfully, she was far from it. But that still didn't mean she fancied the idea of walking around with a bloodstain on her dress.

When she spun around to see him still grinning, she glowered. "Speaking of enjoyment, you seem to be in an awfully good mood. I take it you're finished sulking?" The way his grin froze and fell just a bit was easily the high point of her day.

"I do not sulk."

"Really?" It was Jane's turn to grin when he arched a brow at her. "Then why have you been ignoring me for the past two hundred years?"

After the events in Strasbourg, Loki had remained mysteriously absent. None of his sudden appearances, none of his disparaging remarks about mortals. For more than two centuries, there was nothing except her and the yawning expanse of eternity. It had been almost… dull. Not that she would ever admit that to him.

To Loki's credit, he recovered quickly, although, it wasn't altogether unsurprising. He always had been good at that. Banter that bordered a fine line between hostility, teasing, and genuineness had become their specialty, a trademark of their interactions. "Why, Jane… have you missed me during my absence?"

"I didn't say that, so don't flatter yourself." She stared him down, or tried to, rather. Her skills at
intimidation were virtually nonexistent when facing a mortal human, much less the God of Mischief. Even still, she tried, crossing her arms and setting her jaw for good measure. "Well?"

"I've been busy."

She wasn't about to let him get away with such a vague response. "Doing?" When she thought about it, though, why she cared at all about where he'd been or why he hadn't visited her over the past two centuries was beyond her.

"You've grown awfully bold over the years." His grin shifted into a smirk even as she fought to maintain her defiance. "I can't say that I find it unappealing. Confidence, even if it is only an attempt, becomes you."

It was so unlike anything he'd ever said to her before that, for a moment, Jane didn't even know what to say. She eventually let the – compliment? – pass in one ear and out the other as she, again, redirected the conversation. "You still didn't answer me."

"I am aware of that."

Jane sighed. Of course he was. It would have been more shocking for Loki to not be aware of just how well he manipulated a conversation. At least she was getting better at noticing it. Early on, she would begin a discussion with a specific purpose in mind only to end up talking about something completely different. Not until he was already gone would she remember what she'd really meant to say. Apparently, the upside to living forever was that she was becoming more adept at recognizing Loki's tricks. But if that was the only upside to her immortality…

"I have been searching for answers." Jane refocused on Loki to find he'd turned and was now staring at the creek. "The sickness that affected Midgard the last time I was here—"

"The Great Plague."

"—was more widespread than many of the humans realized. It began in the far east—"

"China."

"—before spreading to the land you called home at the time—"

"Europe."

He looked to her sharply. "You seem to be under the impression that I need to know the names of these places. Let me assure you, I do not." Jane frowned but closed her mouth, watching as he turned back to the water. "The mortals' living conditions only worsened the effects, but it was still unusual for the disease to be as devastating as it was. Not to mention the fact that I recognized some of the symptoms."

At the thought of those dark years, she had to suppress a shudder. The madness that had overtaken Strasbourg was only the beginning. Their trip back through France revealed far worse situations. It was a miracle Jane, Heinrich, and his men – or the majority of them – had made it to Iceland alive.

"As I suspected, the sickness was not of this realm."

That was… unexpected.

"Then where was it from?" When he didn't answer, she took a couple steps forward. "Loki?"
He paused for so long she began to think he wasn't planning on answering, which would have been typical, but finally, he replied. "Muspelheim." Jane came to a stop when he turned to look at her over his shoulder. "One of the branches of Yggdrasil."

"I remember."

For the longest time, she'd been thrown by the bizarre words Loki sometimes said. In the end, she didn't know if it was because he tired of her asking for clarification, because he wanted to actually teach her, or because he just wanted to revel in her stunned disbelief... all she knew was that, during a rare moment of comparative peace between them, he had explained Yggdrasil and the nine realms it held within its branches.

They were things she'd heard before, parents often entertaining their children with fanciful tales of the gods or frightening them into good behavior with warnings of the giants of fire and ice. But that was all she'd believed them to be. Stories. To find out that a great deal of them were, in fact, true had been a shock.

"But how did we contract one of their illnesses?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" His flippant attitude only made her brows knit together, but he smoothly ignored it, turning to face her completely. "For that particular disease to have spread here, a human must have been exposed to it, which can only mean one thing." Jane's focus flicked between his eyes, his body, and his feet as he moved closer, gradually closing the gap between them. "A son of Muspel somehow found his way to this realm."

Loki always had the uncomfortable habit of invading her personal space when he was around. She had the sneaking suspicion it was just another form of his mischievous nature, something he did simply because he liked to watch her squirm. For the most part, she'd become somewhat accustomed to it over the years. But being familiar with the act didn't equate being comfortable with it.

Swallowing hard, she fought down the sense of self-preservation that always seemed to make itself known as he drew nearer. The issue wasn't so much that he was too close, it was that he was too close and wearing that grin. Because despite being immortal, struggling with her still very mortal instincts was a constant battle around Loki, as if her body naturally recognized that he was the predator and she the prey.

When no more than a couple feet remained, he stopped.

Jane craned her neck to continue looking at him. If intimidation was what he intentionally strived for – an entirely possible motive – then he excelled at it wholly. At the same time, though, maybe it was just her imagination, which was also entirely possible.

Lifting a hand, she shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun off the water. "But what would the fire giants be doing here?"

"Another good question."

"And how would they even get here? You said the…" Jane gestured indistinctly, struggling with the unfamiliar word.

"Bi-Frost?"

"Yes. You said the Bi-Frost was the only way to travel between the realms."

He nodded thoughtfully, attention drifting to some point above her head for a moment. "That is true."
Then, he grinned. "Unless one knows the workings of magic."

Jane considered his words. "You never told me of any other…” Gods? Creatures? "Beings that were skilled in sorcery as well."

Loki had only ever mentioned that his abilities were exceptional among those in his realm. So, as if the idea of a mischievous master of magic wasn't unsettling enough, she now knew that the rest of the cosmos contained… others capable of magic. The more she learned of the realms, the more clearly she felt the disadvantages of her own.

"I was unaware of any obligation I had to inform you of everything." He managed to sound haughty, teasing, and coldly aloof all at the same time. It would have been just like him to leave it at that, which made it all the more surprising when he continued. "The sons of Muspel are not masters of magic. Not in the same way I am, at least."

Jane frowned. It was one thing for her to think of him as skilled. It was another thing entirely for him to say it so boldly. He was too cocky for his own good. One day, it would get him into trouble.

"However, there are a few among them skilled enough to make the journey between the realms."

Crossing one arm over her body to hold the opposite elbow, she let the other hand hang down, fingers absentmindedly finding the place on her upper thigh where Loki had healed her. Her thumb traced back and forth over the spot where a scar should be. There was nothing but clear, smooth skin beneath her skirt, but all the talk of magic and sorcery had the spot tingling as if something was there.

"That still doesn't explain why they would come here. You've made it perfectly clear just how dull you believe this world to be. What use would there be for fire giants to come here?"

"And that, Jane, was what I was attempting to discover."

She waited for the explanation, heart tripping a little quicker, breath catching in her lungs. But when he remained silent, her excitement deflated a bit, and she looked to him expectantly. "Well?"

"I found nothing."

Somewhere, in a time long ago and a place covered in craggy mountains with snow-covered peaks, a woman named Signe who was far more gullible and far less worldly and altogether more trusting would have believed Loki.

Jane did not.

She stared at him shrewdly. Then, ignoring his smug expression, she lowered her hand, looked away, and blew out the heavy breath she'd been holding. "I don't believe that."

"Oh?"

She shook her head, still avoiding his gaze. She didn't want to witness the pleased glint in his eyes that always appeared when she disagreed with him. He enjoyed arguing – discussing things, he would correct – more than anyone she'd ever met.

"No, I think you know exactly what's going on. You wouldn't be… you if something was happening of which you weren't aware.” Moving around him, Jane retrieved the clean rag that had partially slid back into the water. "That's what makes you so frustrating."

"That I am knowledgeable?"
"Not exactly." She dunked the cloth into the water to get rid of the debris it had picked up before straightening, wringing out the excess water and laying it across a nearby rock. "You're frustrating because you keep everything to yourself. Or most of it. I can't fault you for wanting to know or understand things, but you could at least share it with me, especially since it concerns me."

Though, that wasn't quite right.

"Well, not me directly but me as in my people." She could feel the weight of his regard on her back, knew what he was going to say. "And I don't even want to hear it. Just because I'm immortal doesn't mean these aren't my people. We've had this conversation before."

For a long moment, the only sound was of chirping birds and the slight splashing of the bloody rag she dipped in the creek. Crouched in the same way she'd been before Loki had arrived, she scrubbed at the second piece of fabric.

"Again, we return to the question of why you believe I should share anything with you."

Jane lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "I don't know... because everyone needs someone to talk to?" The gods knew she wished she had someone with whom to share the secret of her circumstances. Someone besides Loki, of course. He didn't count. "Then again, maybe there's someone else you share your schemes with."

"There isn't." Something about the response made her hesitate, hands stilling in the water as she turned to look at him over her shoulder. She watched a peculiar expression cross his face, but then it was gone before she could fully process its meaning. "I prefer to keep my schemes, as you put it, to myself."

Snorting a laugh, she turned back to the water. "That, I believe."

Knowing she wasn't going to pull a truthful answer from their conversation, Jane resigned herself to not knowing.

For the moment.

The now clean rag was laid out on the rock beside the other one before she pointed at him. "But there is something going on. I know it. I just don't know if it's only the fire giants or if you have something to do with it. Whether you're involved or not, though, I know there's something going on with you, too." He grinned all the more at her jabbing finger. "You appearing in Norway that day wasn't some random event, just like you didn't save me out of the goodness of your heart."

"I'm hurt, Jane." He pressed a palm flat against his chest in mock affront.

"Only because I don't believe you when you say you're not up to something."

"Hm." Pursing his lips, he spun on his heel and took a few steps away from her. "Perhaps I am aware of what is going on with Muspelheim. Perhaps I did have some sort of plan when I appeared to you all those years ago." He stopped. "Or..."

Her eyes narrowed when he turned back to her.

"Perhaps I am only leading you on, making you believe I have ulterior motives. Did you ever consider the possibility that I've been acting just suspicious enough to arouse your curiosity when, in reality, I've done everything to you for no other reason than to cause mischief?" He held his hands out in a disarming manner. "It is my title, after all."
Jane scanned his figure, took in his annoying smirk and his annoying confidence and his annoying presence and felt… annoyed.

With a huff, she pressed a finger and thumb to her temples. "You give me a headache, do you know that?"

The laugh that followed was even more annoying. And when she strode over and poked him in the chest, she was annoyed that he didn't even have the decency to look startled.

"I don't know what's going on with the fire giants, and as long as they stay out of this realm, I don't care. But you…" Her lip curled, eyes flashing with a challenge. "Everything you do has a purpose behind it, some sort of reason. I don't know why you wanted me to live forever, but you had a reason for giving me that apple, and believe me when I say I will find out."

Grin resolutely in place, he glanced from her eyes to the determined twist of her mouth to the finger still jabbed against his armor. "You can search forever and never know, Jane. It's always hardest to see that which is right under your nose."

"Well, then, I guess it's a good thing I have an eternity to figure it out."

"Still not long enough."

She pressed a little harder into his chest. "I will find out."

Suddenly, her hand was caught in his, not a harsh or firm grip as it had been in some of their past meetings, but gently. He gave the slightest tug to bring her closer while he stepped forward as well. For the briefest moment, she panicked that, for some inane reason, he was going to kiss her even though nothing but an uneasy tension had ever accompanied their meetings…

But he didn't kiss her. He leaned in right next to her. His cheekbone pressed to hers while the soft ends of his hair tickled her nose, and there was the faintest scent of something like cedar and snow before she felt breath that was both warm and cool brush over her ear."

"Good luck."

Then he was gone.

And by the time her heartbeat had returned to a normal rate and she'd caught her breath, she turned around to see that every single one of the bloodied rags were as pristinely white as they'd been before the birth. And when she looked down, her hair and dress were completely dry and the stain was gone.

Jane struggled, gritting her teeth as if that would somehow ease the weight of the wooden plank she and Margery were carrying. They moved around the still-smoking coals of a fire and raised the board when a couple children darted beneath it before dropping it with the rest of the planks. There was a sizeable stack now, growing larger by the moment as the buildings of Roanoke were systematically torn apart to prepare for their journey.

"Have you heard anything of where we're headed?"
"The rumor is that we'll head north towards Chesapeake Bay." Jane wiped bits of sawdust from her hands while they made their way back to grab another plank. "The natives in that area have always been especially helpful to us."

Margery nodded. "Yes, they have."

"That's not for certain, though. It's just gossip."

"Either way, it will be nice to relocate." Her mouth twisted when she eyed the next plank they were to carry. "Although, I can't say I enjoy the preparations. My mother would surely faint if she could see the callouses I've developed since we arrived." She held out her hands to show off the rough patches of skin.

Jane glanced at her own hands in response. If Margery's mother would faint at her daughter's, what would she do if she saw Jane's? Years spent riding horses and holding a sword had toughened her hands in an unladylike way that didn't fit in with the women of the sixteenth century. Even though she'd led a more dignified life for the past few decades, her callouses were slow to fade. Gloves had been a wardrobe staple back in England.

"Feel relieved, then, that your mother isn't here to see it. Still, I doubt Henry would turn you away because of rough hands."

Margery immediately dissolved into a fit of giggling at the mention of the man and began to talk about their latest interaction, only pausing long enough to lift another plank. She was hopelessly enamored with him and had been caught dreamily staring at him on more than one occasion.

But while she talked, Jane barely listened.

Because on top of the plank they were carrying was a human-shaped handprint that was unnaturally large, unnaturally sporting claw marks at the end of the long fingers, and unnaturally burned into the wood.

They continued to dismantle the structures over the next week until the people of Roanoke were ready to leave on the morning of the ninth day. People rushed about gathering last minute belongings and items, but there was an excitement in the air. The rumors had been true. They were heading north for Chesapeake.

Jane was moving about, tossing dirt on the fires from the previous evening when someone bounded up to her. Glancing up, she took in Hugh Pattenson, face shiny with perspiration and breathing heavily.

"Good morning, Ms. Pierce." He grinned so wide, she swore she saw every one of his teeth. "Lovely day for a trek, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But you know I've asked you a thousand times to call me Jane." Being able to bear a name that was half hers was nice, for a change.

"It wouldn't be proper if I did."

That wasn't completely true. It would be perfectly acceptable for him to call Jane by her first name so
long as they were merely friends. The problem was Hugh had no intention of only being her friend. Based on what the other women had said, he'd taken a fancy to her and wanted to begin a courtship, something to which Jane had no intentions of agreeing. She was already trying to formulate a response for when that day came, some way to let him down easy.

For now, she smiled good-naturedly. "If you insist."

"I'm actually here to ask a favor of you." Jane stood, knees cracking from the constant motion of crouching and standing. "Mr. Ellis mentioned that we need to leave a sign that we've gone for when Governor White returns."

"The abandoned settlement isn't sign enough?"

Hugh awkwardly laughed, one hand rubbing at the back of his neck while his face flushed in embarrassment. "A sign of where we're going… that's what I meant to say." He cleared his throat, buying some time to compose himself, and explained. "Anything we leave on the ground is likely to be disturbed by wild animals or the natives, so Mr. Ellis has instructed us to carve the name of the friendly tribe into a tree. He's sure the governor will find it and understand."

"He instructed us to do that?"

The same nervous grin spread across his mouth. "Well, technically he asked me, but I've been busy helping the Chapman's this morning and was wondering if you'd mind helping me."

Beyond Hugh were nearly a dozen other young men standing about, each of them perfectly capable of carving a word in a tree, but instead of enlisting any of them to help, Hugh had come to her. The women's words flitted through her mind again, and she had to fight a frown at the thought of them. His proposal would surely be coming soon.

Perfect…

Nevertheless, Jane held out her hand. "Thank you, Ms. Pierce. Here you are." She grasped the hilt of the proffered blade and tucked it through the sash at her waist. "Are you sure you don't need any assistance?"

"No, Hugh, I'm sure I can manage." It wasn't like it would be a challenging task. Still, sometimes it was difficult for her to remember that, to everyone else, she was supposed to be a delicate maiden instead of an over five hundred year old once-Viking. And when it wasn't difficult, it was undoubtedly aggravating.

Hugh hesitated before jogging back to the Chapman's, while Jane, now alone, scanned the forest line, selecting one of the larger oak trees on which to leave the word. She set to work right away, repeatedly gouging the letters as deep and wide as possible. But while she worked, her mind wandered. Of its own accord, it revisited the conversation she'd had with Loki on his last visit.

They had come here. The fire giants of Muspelheim had come to her realm… to what, spread sickness? That couldn't be the only reason, especially considering the random handprints she'd found around the colony.

After noticing the first one that day with Margery, Jane had seen a few others scattered about. One on another board from a building being taken down, one nearly hidden on the side of a tree on the outskirts of town, two on the cart that held their supplies. When she'd pointed it out, the other colonists just laughed and dismissed it as children playing harmless pranks, but Jane knew the truth. It was no prank, not when she'd seen one of the handprints around the base of the cross that topped
the church steeple, a place that would've been impossible for any of the children to reach.

As much as she didn't want to believe it, the truth was hard to deny. They were human-like, but much too large and clawed. Not to mention the imprints had been burned into whatever surface they touched. Unless there was another set of mythical, otherworldly beings she hadn't heard of yet that were significantly larger than humans and whose body temperature ranged at levels rivaling an inferno, there was no way around it. Those handprints must belong to fire giants.

It brought everything full circle – albeit, a confusing one – and within it was Loki with his smug, knowing grin, holding all the answers.

After tracing the engraving one more time, Jane lowered the blade and stepped back to observe her work.

*CROATOAN*

Carefully fingering the point of the knife, she glanced between the tree and the settlement a few times. Each letter was as deep as the first joint of her finger and half as wide. The tree was just close enough and her carving just large enough to where Governor White would surely find it upon his return and know where they'd gone.

"Ms. Pierce!" She started at the sudden exclamation and dropped the knife. Turning, she spied Hugh standing just past the remains of what used to be the Chapman residence, waving to her. "We're preparing to leave. Hurry back, now!"

Lifting her hand in acknowledgement, Jane watched him jog back to the group that had begun to gather at the far end of the settlement, but when she leaned down to gather up the knife he'd given her, it no longer lay on the ground but was buried to the hilt in the tree.

Jane sighed, smiling a little at the sight.

"I go over two centuries without seeing you, and now you visit me twice in five months. If only everyone were so fortunate as me."

Just because she couldn't see Loki, it didn't mean he wasn't there. She'd long since realized he not only was able to move through the realms at will and perform feats of magic, he was also able to render himself invisible. It was a sneaky trick that she didn't appreciate, though, and she'd told him as much. The idea of going about her life while Loki watched without her knowing was unnerving.

"I'd appreciate it if you removed that knife so I can leave."

A soft chuckle came from behind her, but there was nothing out of the ordinary when she spun towards the sound. When it came again, this time from the left, she again turned to see nothing. The chuckling trailed off, leaving Jane in relative silence. She waited, listening for the sound of footsteps and watching for a glimpse of green that would give away his position.

But there was still nothing.

Jane was just about to write Loki off as having disappeared – even though, technically, he'd never appeared – when she heard a faint scraping. Thinking it was only a squirrel or bird of some sort, she casually glanced over her shoulder. However, she froze at what she saw. It was a knife, the same knife that had been buried in the tree, only now it was floating in mid-air, carving a letter into a nearby tree. She continued to stare in partial disbelief as two more letters joined the first.

*CRO*
At first, it seemed Loki was going to mimic her carving, but after the engraving looped back around to complete the O, it stopped.

"Ms. Pierce, are you coming?"

"Just a moment…" She called back without looking away from the tree. "I'll be right there."

The longer she stared, though, the more she realized that the engraving wouldn't contain anything else. And when the blade fell to the ground, it confirmed her suspicions. She knew the act for what it was: a prank, a trick, another of Loki's mischievous deeds.

Crossing the space, she picked up the knife. Her carving had been meant to be a sign as to where they were heading, but Loki's partial engraving would probably send mixed signals and confuse the men when they arrived. For all she knew, the governor might think the word a warning instead of a directive.

Jane shook her head and breathed another sigh. "I think I liked it better when you were gone." And she pointedly ignored the chuckled that came from behind her as she walked back towards the group.

Chapter End Notes

History fact for this chapter – the child born at the beginning is meant to be Virginia Dare, the first English child to be born in the Americas. In addition, all of the colonists mentioned – Governor John White, Ananias and Eleanor Dare, George Howe, Hugh Pattenson – were all real names of people there at the time. Even Jane’s alias, Jane Pierce was an actual woman that was part of the Roanoke Colony. In the end, no one has been able to figure out what happened to the colonists. When John White returned, he found the settlement disbanded with only the word CROATOAN carved into one tree and CRO carved into another.

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Chapter Five

“You're so calm and quiet, you never say. But there are things inside you. I see them sometimes, hiding in your eyes.”

1698: Caribbean

All Jane could see was blue.

Blue skies. Blue sea. Each of them spread out in an endless expanse until they met in a thin line that formed the horizon. From that horizon came the wind, gusting strongly, whipping tendrils of hair from the braid hanging down her back. It carried with it all the aspects of the ocean. The sound of gulls, the scent of brine, the feel of waves, and when her tongue darted out to wet her lips, the taste of salt.

It was comforting. Normal. Pleasant.

It made her think of Norway.

But there was no serene blue beneath her, just the flurry of motion.

A particularly loud clang of steel sounded from below. She clung to the edge of the platform halfway up the mast and peered over the edge, fighting to keep her eyes open even as grit from the wind lined them, crusting in her eyelashes. The activity occurring was too interesting to miss.

One by one, the men of the Adventure Galley boarded the Quedagh Merchant. As a whole, little mercy could be found for pirates in the Caribbean. Opposition was met with the clean slice of a cutlass and a subsequent splatter of blood across the deck while surrender meant a few weeks in a dingy brig and the eventual noose. This was no exception. Years of experience at privateering was on their side, evidenced by the skill with which they overtook the pirates.

From the safety of the platform where the captain had ordered her to remain until the Quedagh Merchant had been successfully taken, Jane watched as the majority of the pirates were killed, only a
few dropping their swords in time to receive clemency. But it was only momentary. Surrender delayed death, not circumvented it.

When the last pirate yielded and fell to his knees, the men of the Adventure Galley roared in triumph. Amidst the sound, Jane picked up on the thump of William Kidd's boots as he descended from the quarterdeck. "The ship is ours, men!" And holding their swords aloft, they yelled all the more at their captain's exclamation.

After the commotion had subsided and the men had begun to pillage the other ship's stores, Kidd caught Jane's attention and motioned her down. It might have been several centuries since she'd spent time at sea, but a person never really lost the natural ability to move about a ship once learned, even if the vessels her people had used were far less extravagant. So it was with an easy grace that Jane swung from the platform and began to shimmy her way down the ropes.

"What with the size of the Merchant, I expected a bit more resistance." Jane called out over the din as she moved across the deck to Kidd. He might have exuded an air of victory to everyone else, but to her, his agitation was clear even before she reached him.

"As did I…" When she was close enough, he pulled her to him, hands settling firmly at her waist. She suffered the contact, both his hands and his lips as they captured her own in a brief kiss. "But the lackluster fighting was because these weren't pirates."

Still in his arms, Jane leaned back. "What?"

"They were tradesmen." He released her long enough to gesture to the spices, luxurious fabrics, and gold the men were now pulling from below deck. "The ship belonged to Coirgi, a man with considerable influence in the East India Company. I recognized it too late to dissuade the crew."

The Adventure Galley had set out from England almost three years ago with the sole purpose of seeking out pirates. They scoured the Atlantic, eventually picking up Jane during a respite in Madagascar. However, throughout all those years, Captain Kidd located few ships and reaped even fewer benefits, which resulted in a growing unrest among the men. Even Jane was aware that the Quedagh Merchant needed to be taken whether Kidd wanted to or not if he wished to avoid a mutiny.

"We're likely to be branded pirates for this." His hands tightened in her blouse as he watched his men dispassionately. "If we are, England will want my head."

"Run, then." While she spoke, she carefully pulled at his fingers until they loosened and dropped to his side. "It's not as if they'd be able to catch or find you." The oceans were vast and endless and contained plenty of places to hide.

"You're right, they wouldn't, but…" The words trailed off, and Jane tracked the progress of his hard swallow, watched the shadows cross his eyes.

"But what?"

In the background were the normal sounds of life at sea – the billowing sails, the waves lapping against the hull of the ship, the off-tune singing of a raucous chantey – but it was the thud of a bag filled with gold dropped to the deck that roused Kidd from whatever deep thoughts worried him. When he looked to her, the shadows were gone and a falsely assuring grin had been pasted across his face.

"It's nothing." One of his hands cupped her cheek. "Nothing to worry your pretty head over, at any
They stayed that way for a moment before he lowered his hand and stepped around Jane to face the crew.

"Hold on, men, I think I've changed my mind." The sailors halted, most of them holding – and probably pocketing – pieces of treasure, and turned to their captain. "It seems a waste to abandon a vessel such as this." Apparently, several of the men were in agreement, casting longing looks to the extravagance of the trade ship. "So, as opposed to keeping the Galley, how about we sink this rotten piece of filth and take the Merchant for ourselves?"

An uproarious cry was answer enough.

The treasure was systematically placed back in the hold, Kidd overseeing the progress. The atmosphere among the men was a thousand times lighter, the dark edge of mutiny gone from their eyes. There was a new threat now, though, one from an enemy much larger and much more powerful than the crew.

As Jane watched the progress, her attention settled on Kidd. For the most part, it looked like he enjoyed the excitement, reveled in his men's renewed loyalty to him after the successful attack. But when he turned to catch her hand, helping her off the gangplank and onto the Quedagh Merchant, his expression was the complete opposite.

There was only the thrill of life in the crew's eyes.

In William Kidd's, there was nothing but death.

Six months passed quickly and found Jane standing on a weathered dock, mouth slack and mind struggling to comprehend what was happening as she took in the way the new ship's hull gleamed. It was quite a bit smaller than the Quedagh Merchant, but no less excessive. Silently, she waited while Kidd maneuvered the vessel closer to the dock and a few men tied it off. Not until he'd stepped off the ship and held out his hands expectantly with a smile on his face did she speak.

"You're the only captain I've ever known that goes on a simple scouting trip and comes back with a new ship, a skeleton crew, and less than a quarter of the treasure he originally left with."

Dumbfounded, she glanced from Kidd to the ship a couple times. There were too many variables missing for her to put the pieces of the puzzle together on her own. "It's only been three days. Can I ask what happened?"

He grinned, unabashed. "I might not have been entirely truthful when I said scouting trip. Or at least, it wasn't the type of scouting trip you believed it to be."

"Clearly." Jane lifted a hand when one of the crewmembers waved to her before refocusing on Kidd. "This was planned." Phrasing it as a question would have been pointless, not when she already knew the answer.

"Yes."

The sun reflecting brightly off the wood tried to catch her eye, but she stubbornly refused to look its direction. Doing so would only make it difficult to huff in irritation, especially when all she wanted
was to admire the ship for the beautiful piece of craftsmanship it was. At her exhale, Kidd stepped forward.

"Evangeline, the posters are everywhere. It won't be long before I'm recognized. I can't stay on the run any longer."

In the months since they'd taken the *Quedagh Merchant* for their own, word of the act had spread. It hadn't been long before postings began to appear in nearly every town they made port, signs that claimed Kidd and his crew were pirates and enemies of the crown.

It was ironic.

Kidd had set his sights on the Merchant in an attempt to appease his crew and prevent his death at the hands of a mutiny. However, the act had only ensured his death, this time at the hands of the general English population.

"I'm missing the part where that fits into you dropping me off at an inn, leaving for three days, and coming back with... this." After gesturing to the ship, she crossed her arms.

"Well, I couldn't very well return to New York aboard the *Merchant*. That would be somewhat counterproductive to my appeal against piracy."

Jane paused. "You're... going home?"

"That's the idea."

She studied his expression, could see through the cracks to the genuine worry beneath that he tried to hide. "You know what will happen if you do."

"I know what *might* happen." He fingered the hilt of the cutlass at his side. It was something he always did when he was nervous or uneasy. "But I know what *will* happen to Sarah and the girls if I don't return: they will bear the brunt of the revenge intended for me."

At the mention of Kidd's wife and family, Jane felt a twinge in her chest. It wasn't jealousy. No, she didn't bear enough affection for the captain, despite what he liked to believe in the late hours of the night, to encourage thoughts of envy. Instead, it was a genuine sadness she always felt for the woman he'd left behind to chase pirates.

Did she know what really happened when men went away to sea?

Did she realize the extent of her husband's immorality and infidelity while he was gone?

Maybe Sarah honestly didn't know what went on. After all, she did run in the upper circles of New York where talk of scandal and pirates was unwelcome. Or maybe she did know and just pretended not to care.

"So what will you do?"

"Like I said, I'll return to Boston to plead my case. I won't leave Sarah at their mercy."

It was probably one of the most admirable things she'd ever heard him say and clearly showed how deeply he cared for his wife, regardless of the way he acted in her absence. Even still, last minute shows of honor wouldn't save him.

Clunking boots signaled the approach of another sailor, and Jane and Kidd both fell silent. They
nodded to the man as he passed behind them on his way to another ship farther down the dock, but Jane continued to watch his retreat. Even once he was out of earshot, she still spoke under her breath.

"England won't stand for what happened. You know they won't."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kidd shrug. "Perhaps."

"No, not perhaps."

She turned back to try and convince him of the truth that was so plainly obvious, but when she met his gaze, there was nothing but firm determination. It was no use. The consequences were irrelevant. Kidd would return to New York.

"What about the rest of the crew." She nodded her head towards the handful of men that moved on deck. "You saw fit to leave them behind?"

"It wasn't so much me leaving them behind as them being willing to search for other opportunities. Not all of them were required to manage this ship, so I needed to thin them out." He waved away the question already forming in her mind. "Before the issue even came up, I found out they were willing to turn against me to join Culliford."

"Did Culliford also take the Merchant?"

Robert Culliford was the quintessential foil to any of William Kidd's plans. They'd first met as shipmates years ago, but when Kidd had advanced to captain, Culliford led a mutiny against him and took the ship for himself. That set the tone for all their interactions since. To call them enemies would be putting it nicely.

"Not this time. He seemed willing to settle for the majority of my crew." Kidd smiled to himself. "He didn't know he was actually doing me a favor by taking those mutinous seadogs. It won't be long before he realizes he needs to sleep with one eye open and keep the other trained on his back at all times. If he doesn't, he's liable to find a dagger in it."

"So if Culliford didn't take the Merchant, where is she?"

"Shipwrecked. Crashed onto the rocks on the northern part of the island."

"And the treasure?"

Kidd's attention snapped to Jane. "What?"

"All of the treasure that was on the Merchant… what happened to it? This new ship of yours is too small to carry all that you had."

"And how would you know how much of the treasure is missing?"

Too many times Jane had seen the captain shift from easygoing to furious, so the threat in his voice made her rightfully wary. But when she met his eyes, the wrinkles at the corners of them loosened the knot in her stomach.

Kidd threw back his head and laughed. "I should have been keeping a closer eye on you all this time because you're the only one to have realized that. When we switched ships and sailed out, Culliford didn't even look twice at the smaller vessel." He shook his head, shoulders still shaking with his last few chuckles. "My men – well, I suppose they're his men now – spent more time in the hold than you ever did, so for you to know how much I could carry on board in the few times you went down
there either means you're sharper than other women I've known or my crew was just that brainless."

"It might be a little of both."

"You know, I always did think there was something special about you." His fingers rasped through his beard as he scratched his chin, regarding her. "Not many women who take on a life at sea are learned, much less possess this… I guess it's an air you have about you. Anyway, you've always seemed like more of a lady than a wench."

It was an unusual statement for Kidd to make considering the circumstances in which they'd met. Her end of their arrangement wasn't exactly ladylike, but it was apparently harder to stifle years of proper living in England than she imagined.

"I don't know about lady…"

"Regardless, since I'm headed home, you're free to leave now. No conditions, no exceptions, no bartering. Our deal is complete. And because I'm so generous…" With a flourish, he whipped out a rolled piece of parchment from one of his many coat pockets and held it out. "Here is my gift to you."

Jane took the parchment and unrolled it to find a map of the Caribbean. She observed the familiar sketches. It was one she'd often seen in his quarters. The only difference now was the dot that marked their current location on the southwestern tip of Santa Catalina and the large $X$ that had been placed near the northeastern tip.

"What is this?"

"You'd think that after spending a year with me at sea, you'd recognize a treasure map."

Almost in wonder, she touched a finger to the small island. "You hid the gold."

"Well, not all of it. But there's enough there to ensure whoever finds it will live comfortably." He spoke casually, but his eyes twinkled when they met over the top of the parchment. "And before I forget…" She automatically caught the tossed bag, heard the coins clink when it landed in her hand. "There's a little extra to get you going. An advance, so to speak."

By far, it was the strangest day she'd had in quite some time. Life had been hectic since they'd taken the *Quedagh Merchant*, but even during the best of times, Kidd had never been one to be overly caring. For him to give her a map to locate the treasure he'd hidden *and* money to help her on the way was…

"I suppose this is farewell, Evangeline."

Jane followed his gaze out to the ocean and read his thoughts. If he wanted to leave today, he needed to go now, before the tide trapped him on the island overnight. However, despite the urgency, they stood there in an awkward silence, Jane fiddling with the drawstring of the bag to give her hands something to do.

What now?

Did she shake his hand? Run off without another word?

In the end, she opted for neither and simply dipped her head. "Thank you."

His attention slid back to her. "I can't say that's what I expected to hear."
"The circumstances of our time together may not have been ideal, but I appreciate your help nonetheless. It was better than the alternative." Her nose wrinkled at what the past year could have been like.

"Seeing how our agreement has ended, I'm guessing any chance of an obligatory kiss would be unlikely."

"You would be correct."

He nodded. "Fair enough." But then he reached out and grabbed her hand. There was something about retreating that only seemed to further excite men and make them more persistent, so Jane bit back a sigh and allowed him to rub his thumb across the back of her hand. "And would it also be pushing my luck if I requested a kiss farewell?"

She offered a wan smile, dragging out the word. "Yes."

"Very well, I suppose I can't blame you." He pressed a light kiss to the back of her knuckles before dropping her hand, immediately whirling away to cross the gangplank back onto the ship.

A few men appeared from nowhere, raised the gangplank, and pushed off while Kidd made his way up to the quarterdeck, barking orders to the rest of the crew and spinning the helm so they faced the open sea. The sails billowed in the warm, southern wind, and the timbers creaked when the ship moved forward, sluicing through the clear water. They were a decent way out when she spotted Kidd move to the stern. He whisked off his hat, holding it out as he called back to her.

"Best of luck to you, Evangeline."

Wishing him the same would just be cruel when they both knew what his future likely held so Jane merely waved a hand in response. She had no doubt today would be the last time they'd see each other.

Kidd was a wanted man. It didn't matter that he'd been one of the most respected men in New York. It didn't matter that he'd captured countless French vessels and pirate ships. It didn't matter that he had enough treasure to tempt even the most honorable man into setting him free. His chances of clearing his name and getting out of the situation alive were slim to none.

The sun dipped low in the sky, warning of the coming night. She should have been searching for a room at one of the inns, but she remained, sitting alone on the dock, legs swinging back and forth and toes dangling in the water, staring out at the ocean long after Kidd disappeared from sight.

"He seemed… interesting."

It wasn't another presence that startled Jane so much as the simple breaking of the silence. The few sailors that had been hovering around the docks had left, gone to town or returned to their ships for the night, leaving her alone with the gentle sound of the waves. But it only took one look up to a set of familiar grey-green eyes to put her at ease again.

"That's giving him more credit than he probably deserves." She arched her back and stretched before leaning forward to observe the ripples her toes made in the water. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough."

It didn't really tell her much of anything. How long was long enough? Regardless of whether Loki had heard their entire conversation or only the last few moments, though, it had been a private discussion, one he had no business listening to.
"You know I don't appreciate you lurking around without me knowing you're there."

"And you know I have never subjected myself to the wishes of humans."

Jane let his words fall flat and watched a school of minnows circle beneath her feet. It was blunt and straightforward and perhaps a little unsympathetic, but it was the truth. Trying to change Loki was like trying to control the weather. Though, that still wasn't right. A person might actually have better luck trying to tame a thunderstorm.

"Who was that man?"

"William Kidd, captain of the Adventure Galley and the Quedagh Merchant." A few of the braver fish ventured closer to the surface, but when she twitched a toe, they scattered. "Privateer turned pirate at the behest of his men."

One of the boards creaked beneath Loki's weight as he stepped closer. The dark edge of his surcoat cut off the coastline to her left, hovering at the edge of her sight. "I meant, who was he to you?"

"He was… many things." Even without meeting his eyes, she felt the weight of his regard pressing down on her. "It was complicated, Loki. Let's leave it at that."

"No."

"You know, I'm under the impression you get your way more often than not in Asgard. Also, you don't seem to understand the concept of privacy."

Her focus slowly drifted from the water beneath her to his leg beside her to his face above her. Aside from that time in Strasbourg – she still didn't quite understand all that had happened then – Loki had never been prone to betraying emotion unless it was intentional, which was why it was almost disturbing that she could see his resolve even though his expression was blank.

They stared at each other, Loki wanting information just as stubbornly as Jane withheld it, but she was the first to break the silence. "It doesn't matter what he was to me. He's gone now, returned to New York to answer for the crimes he's committed… but I'm sure you heard that while you were eavesdropping."

Loki smoothly ignored the added comment. "Honor amongst thieves."

"They're not all thieves. Classifying them as good men might not be correct, but that doesn't mean they're all bad, either." She decided it best not to comment on the more… forward nature of other pirate crews. "One of the men actually grew up studying to become a doctor. Another used to be a member of the royal navy. Quite a few of the crewmembers came from families I would've never thought would lead to piracy."

How could a governor's son abandon his birthright to take up a cutlass and sail under a pirate's flag? Were the duties and responsibilities of an honorable station too demanding or too stifling?

"It's interesting to see how far a person can wander when they feel there's no other choice." Jane had found people that felt trapped by circumstances beyond their control tended to go to extraordinary lengths to escape. "Some are willing to follow in their parents' footsteps and hold a proper profession. Others just want to feel free."

"While that is incredibly fascinating…” Loki's tone implied everything she'd been saying was anything but. "Evasion will only work in your favor for so long."
"Unless we do as I suggested and stop talking about this."

"And you believe I'll agree to that?"

It was hope more than wisdom that made her hesitate, but the crooked grin that lifted one corner of his mouth was answer enough. She couldn't win this battle. So it was on a heavy sigh that at least a partial explanation of what she knew he wanted to hear poured out.

"Captain Kidd and I made a deal that ensured we both received what we wanted."

The situation sounded far more idealized when she put it that way.

"Hm..." She carefully eyed Loki as he moved to sit beside her. Any time he made that sound, it was never good. "So what was it that you wanted out of the deal?"

If anyone were to show up on the dock right then, they would most likely think the two of them picturesque, both sitting on the dock, legs hanging over the edge. For all anyone else knew, they were watching the sunset, not discussing the particulars of Jane's personal life. Conversation aside, though, it was strange how... normal it felt to just sit there with Loki. Jane looked out over the water, taking a moment to admire the way the setting sun outlined the clouds in brilliant shades of pink, orange, and red.

Consumed by the view, it took a few moments of swinging her legs to realize her toes were no longer skimming through the water. She leaned forward only to see the ocean a few inches beneath Loki's boots. Initially, she thought something bizarre was happening with the tide, but when she noticed the several feet of slimy algae on the posts that was usually beneath water but was now revealed, she peeked at Loki.

"Did you just raise the entire dock so your feet wouldn't touch the water?"

"Yes."

Shaking her head, she stretched her toes down towards the sea that was now completely out of reach. "You should learn to ask before you just change things around. Maybe I enjoyed having my feet in the water."

"You're being evasive again, Jane."

"And you're being frustrating again, Loki."

What she really wanted was to get a rise out of him, which made it even more frustrating when he didn't even spare her a glance, just continued to stare out over the water. "What was your end of the arrangement?"

Jane sighed. He was persistent, but if she offered at least a portion of the truth, there was the possibility he'd drop the issue. "I needed a way off of Madagascar to escape another pirate."

"Why?"

Or not.

Knowing the direction the conversation was headed, she worried her bottom lip. "Because he was planning to do some decidedly unpleasant things to me. Please don't ask me to go into detail."

"Just clarification: murderous or desirous acts?"
Jane gave a bitter, humorless laugh. "With him, I doubt there's much of a difference. One would eventually lead to the other. I'll leave it up to you to decide which one comes first."

At that, Loki did turn. She could almost feel the way his focus bored into her, pulled at her, demanded she meet his eyes. But that was the last thing she wanted right then, and the only way she could prevent doing so was by closing her own. In the darkness, she could pretend she was alone. It made it easier to continue.

"His name was George Booth. From what I'd heard, he was an impressive captain but had a nasty habit of kidnapping women for his own pleasure. Unfortunately, he noticed me one evening and decided I was his for the taking… in more than one sense."

She remembered it like it was yesterday. She doubted she'd ever truly forget. Him following her from the tavern, him shoving her to the ground in the dark streets, him blocking her blows with one hand as he hitched up her skirts with the other. Just the memory of the panic she'd felt that night sent a shiver up her spine.

"Did he…?" Loki left the question open-ended.

"Take me?" Jane's eyes drifted open. "No." She absentmindedly toyed with the ends of her hair. "In the end, Kidd was the only one willing to take the risk and help me off the island."

He was also the only one to come to her rescue that night, but Loki didn't need to know that. At the last moment, Kidd had appeared. He'd hauled Booth off and thrown him unceremoniously to the side, not even pausing when he tripped on the trousers bunched around his ankles and crashed face first into the cobblestones. The blood from Booth's broken nose was nothing compared to that which came from his mouth when Jane recovered enough to deliver a swift kick to it. The gaps where she'd knocked out a couple of his teeth had made her smile through the last traces of fear.

"And the captain's end of the bargain?"

Her throat closed, lips tightening into a thin line. At the same time, her head dropped so she could stare at the weaving fabric of her skirt, and her hands moved from her lap to clutch at the edge of the dock, fingers curling around the jagged wood.

"Jane?"

Then everything went still. It was like the water no longer ebbed and flowed, the sun no longer moved towards the horizon. It was like the invisible currents of energy in the air between them stopped stirring, and in that moment, there was nothing except Jane and Loki and the rigid tension that worked its way through his entire being.

"He took advantage of you." The sinister edge to his voice made her wince.

"He didn't force me if that's what you think."

"But he still took advantage of you and your situation."

"Kidd didn't take anything I wasn't willing to give." A deep, shuddering breath meant to calm her trembling hands did the exact opposite. "I needed safe passage out of Madagascar, and he offered it to me. Yes, it came with a price, but it was a price I was willing to pay."

"You traded your body for a means of escape."

Jane felt the sting of a splinter work its way beneath her skin when her fingers tightened around the
timbers and ground out her reply. "Thank you for stating it so clearly."

"What you did was not proper."

For the second time in their conversation, she issued a cynical laugh, this time to Loki's face when she turned to him. "Are there no women in the Realm Eternal who offer their services?" She rephrased the question when his brows twitched into a slight frown. "It's quite common for women to sell themselves here. Is it not the same where you come from?"

"There are women that do so."

"And are you saying you've never taken advantage of their… generosity?"

In the wake of her insincere smile, Loki's eyes hardened and his response was slow to come. "No."

"No, you haven't used them or no, you have?"

There was no hesitation this time. "I have called on them for their services before." Something dangerous flashed in his eyes at her persistence.

"That's what I figured." Releasing the dock, she wiped her hands on her skirt and stood up. Loki followed her motions, meeting her scowl with his own intense gaze. "So if other women can use their body to get what they need, why is it so wrong for Kidd to have resorted to debauchery when it comes to me?"

In a whirl of black and green, Loki stood. "Because the women I called upon were accustomed to it. That was their station in Asgard. It is not the same with you." He stepped closer, towering above her, but she fearlessly held his eyes. "You are more than someone's whore."

"Why? Because you saw fit to make me your experiment and watch me stumble through eternity? Do you think that gives you some strange claim on me? On how I live my life?"

Jane watched the muscles in Loki's neck and face jump as his jaw tightened. When his eyes narrowed and grew dark, she was distinctly reminded of the fact that he was a god and she was merely human. She might have the gift of immortality, but so did he, along with magic and strength and cunning and who knew how many other attributes that made him a significant threat to her.

It would've been wise to back off and acknowledge the warning, but when it came to Jane Foster, an emotional response had always overpowered wisdom. Someday she would learn to control that. Maybe in another seven hundred years.

But today…

Today, she would let her irritation get the best of her. Today, she would let the ire stiffen her spine and push her forward. Today, she would glare back at him and watch the anger in both their eyes spark in the space between them.

"I hate to say it, Loki, but you're a little late to protect my chastity. It's not like this was the first time I've slept with someone, so any of your misguided attempts at chivalry are wasted."

"Stop."

"And taking into account that I've been unable to marry because of my situation, that means all of the sexual exploits in my past have been improper."
Loki’s hands fist at his side. "Silence."

"So then really, I am a whore."

"Cease this, Jane!" It was the loudest he'd ever spoken to her, just bordering on a shout, but it was the hands that darted out to grasp her wrists that made her fall silent more than his volume.

When she tried to jerk away, he only pulled her closer, and when she tried to pry at his fingers, he only tightened them. After a moment, she fell still and stubbornly looked away, choosing to glare at his chest. Her breathing was hard and heavy with fury, but the longer they stood at their impasse, the more the anger melted away. It receded, was drawn out like the tide, left her feeling exhausted.

There was only a weary sort of confusion written on her face when her focus finally lifted to his. "Why do you care, anyway?"

Loki swallowed and paused, his attention flitting between her eyes. "I don't."

Silence welled up around them as they studied each other. She examined the hard angles of his face, the determined line of his jaw, the keen glint in his eyes… things that spoke to the kind of person Loki was. And as his focus roamed her face, she wondered what he saw in her.

Did he only see the superficial things? The scar at her hairline, a souvenir from a swordplay lesson gone wrong in her youth. The smattering of freckles across her nose earned by years spent in the sun. The specks of auburn in her eyes he wouldn't know were an exact imitation of her mother's.

Or did he see the things concealed beneath her skin? Her uncertainties, her fears, her doubts. The excitement she felt every time she was creating a new life, and the loss she experienced every time she had to leave those she loved behind. The way she breathed in every single sunrise even though she'd seen so very many of them, and the way she sometimes cursed the night knowing she would see the sunrise again instead of Valhalla's shining halls.

Did he see Jane, the person? Or did he see Jane, the game?

It was impossible to tell.

But then she smiled at Loki – a little sad, a little knowing – and gently pulled her hands free from his now slack grip.

"Even though I didn't have much of a choice, I knew what I was getting myself into." She watched him carefully while she spoke. "The agreement was to share Kidd's bed and no other's so long as I was under his care. It might not have been ideal, but if I have to give my attentions to one man to prevent being used by Booth and eventually passed off to his crew as a plaything, I'll gladly do so. In any case, it's easier to rationalize when I'm the one that consented."

Loki tilted his head ever so slightly. "That still doesn't make it appropriate, for the captain or yourself."

"No, it doesn't… but sometimes that's just the way things are. I don't know what life is like in Asgard, but in this realm it's messy. The line between what's right and wrong is often blurred, which means the best decision isn't always going to be the best for you."

A gust of wind swirled around them, carrying the scent of the ocean mixed with a unique fragrance that she'd come to recognize was distinctly Loki. Jane took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

"None of it matters anymore, though. Kidd is gone, and I'm free to do what I want. And what I really
want…” She slid the map from beneath the bag of coins. "Is to get to the treasure he left for me to find before someone else does."

"He left it for you?"

"Yes. Is that so hard to believe?" An arched brow was Loki's only response. It was probably harder for him to believe a man willing to use her would also bequeath her hidden gold. "If I'm going to find it, though, I'll need to leave right away." She glanced at the now dark sky. "Or right away tomorrow morning."

Loki watched her as she sat down to put on her boots. "Where is the treasure located?"

"On the north end of the island." When he held out his hand, she gave him the map. "It's a good day and a half's journey from here."

"What is the likelihood of another person finding it first?"

Jane shrugged. "Hard to say. Depends on how well it's been hidden." After tying the last set of laces, she grabbed the coin purse, stood, and shook out her skirt. However, before she could take back the map, Loki withdrew and held it just out of reach. She paused for a moment, surprised, before trying again. When she received the same result, she crossed her arms and frowned. "Can I have that back?"

"Do you trust me?"

Her expression shifted from a frown into something more skeptical. "I'm not sure you want me to answer that." If she were to list all the feelings she had regarding Loki, trust would be far from the top.

With a smirk, he rephrased. "Do you trust me not to harm you?"

That was a completely different question. While Loki had a penchant for mischief that might put her in harm's way, he'd never actually harmed her. And he knew that she knew that.

"Against my better judgment… yes." Jane watched him glance down at the map, survey the area around them, and look down to the map once more. "What's this about, Loki?"

Without warning, he moved. And before she could do anything more than suck in a sharp breath, she found her nose pressed to his chest while his arms snaked around her waist. Everything went dark. There was an almost overwhelming sensation of pressure – her chest was so tight, she could barely breathe – and the feeling of open air beneath her feet, but then it passed and Jane opened her eyes to a sandy, moonlit beach.

Immediately, she pushed against Loki, nearly falling over backwards when he willingly let her go. "What the hell just happened?" She turned in a quick circle, kicking up sand. "Where are we?"

"We should be near the treasure you seek."

The map rested on the ground near Loki's feet, but Jane disregarded it for the time being, turning in another circle, slower this time. As the familiar sights of northern Santa Catalina and the coast of Hispaniola in the distance registered, her anxiety faded and her racing heart slowed. When she came full circle, she met his eyes.

"Is that… is that how you travel between the realms?"
"Yes and no." Loki bent over to pick up the map and offered it to her. "Moving between realms is quite a bit different than moving within the same one."

She stepped forward, torn between being hesitant to get close to him, being irritated that he'd decided he could just magic her through space without asking, and enthusiastically analyzing all the details of what just happened. If it were anyone other than Loki, she'd ask to be taken through space again just so she could experience it with more awareness. However, it was Loki, which meant she wasn't likely to get a repeat performance.

Taking the parchment and ignoring his amused expression, she studied their position relative to the map. Just as Loki had said, they were in the clearing Kidd had marked. And just as Kidd had said, there was a small chest bearing the captain's insignia.

Wide grin on her face, Jane left Loki in a spray of sand and darted across the clearing. She stumbled more than once, steadying herself with a hand to the ground, before falling to her knees in front of the box that was almost hidden beneath the draping leaves of a bush.

"I can't believe it."

She ran a hand across the ornate carvings that decorated the surface.

"I can't believe it."

And when she lifted the lid, the moonlight illuminated the treasure inside.

"I can't believe it!"

Jane laughed and yelled and dug her fingers into pile of gold and jewels. It wasn't a tremendous amount, but she was all the better for it. Having too much treasure would've been obvious and made her a target. What Kidd had left, though... well, it was a small enough amount that she could easily conceal it, but just enough to ensure she wouldn't have to make any unsavory deals for quite some time.

"Loki!" Still beaming, she squinted at the beveled edge of a diamond. "Come look at this, Loki!"

Her exclamations were met with nothing but the sound of the waves against the rocks in the cove. "Loki, are you even listening to me?"

But when she turned around, she was alone.

A single set of footprints remained where he'd been standing, but there was no body to go with them. Still holding a handful of jewels, Jane stood and took a couple steps towards the indentions. Then, she stopped. She had no way of explaining why or how she knew, but she was positive Loki was gone, not just hiding under a shroud of invisibility. And even though he'd left her alone in an isolated clearing with at least a day's trek between her and the closest town, a smile pulled at her mouth.

Without a doubt, theirs was a complicated relationship.

Even still, it was distinctly theirs.

So it was with that smile that she let her head fall back as she shouted to the stars that dotted the firmament overhead. "Thank you!" The wind carried the words up and out and into the darkness until they were swallowed by the sky.

And Jane didn't know if there was any way Loki could hear her through the space between realms... but in that moment, a part of her hoped he could.
History fact for this chapter – William Kidd and his crew took the Quedagh Merchant for their own, but it's unknown whether he was really a pirate or not. When he returned to New York, he was taken into custody and eventually hanged. Before he arrived in New York, though, it was rumored that he left the Quedagh Merchant and most of the treasure with a few men on an island to barter for his freedom, if necessary. Remains of a ship believed to be the Merchant were found near Catalina Island in the Caribbean, but aside from a small bit that he left on Gardiners Island near New York, the rest of the treasure was never found.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

Even though this chapter isn’t my absolute favorite, I am beyond excited for what’s to come. The next chapter… oh my goodness, I can’t wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Six

“You’re a one-man shift in the weather. You’re the woman that just won’t sell.”

1776: France

Tucking her feet underneath the bench, Jane burrowed deeper into the warmth of her cloak and leaned back until she could relax against the glass window. The sounds of everyday life in Paris – people talking as they passed, the ringing bell that sounded whenever somebody entered the shop nearby, children yelling as they played in the freshly-fallen snow – were distracting, but not distracting enough to pull her away from the book in her hands. She’d been reading it almost nonstop for the past hour.

It was by sheer luck that she’d even come across the book, tucked between copies of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, nearly hidden in the back of the store. But at the same time, maybe it was more than luck that had led her to it. After all, what were the odds?

Jane closed the book, keeping a finger between the pages to mark her place, and traced the lettering on the cover.

*Poetic Edda*

Dust from disuse had settled on her hands when she pulled the book out, but it was the title – a bold, curving script; the kind that caught a person’s eye – that hinted at something more intriguing. And the allusion didn’t disappoint. From the minute she’d opened it, she’d been engrossed by the stories. A few of them were vaguely familiar from her youth, but most were ones she’d never heard. It was likely they were made up, concocted by the author. That didn't change the fact that the majority of the names rang true, though.


Written sometime after she'd left Norway, the *Poetic Edda* told the story of the gods. Not the
Christian god of the world today but Norway's gods. The Vikings' gods. Jane's gods. And that wasn't even the most interesting thing about it. The most captivating part was that, just like the book itself had been a surprise, so was a certain aspect of its contents.

Because within the pages was Loki.

It would be a lie if she said she hadn't been stunned to see tales about the God of Mischief. When his name first appeared, Jane had shut the book in disbelief, opened it to peek at the writing, shut it again and taken a deep breath, and then opened it one last time to see the name still there. But seeing how there were several different stories that included him, it hadn't taken her long to get over her initial shock.

Swiping away the snowflakes that had settled on the pages, Jane thumbed back through the book. Since purchasing it, she'd been reading randomly, skipping from one story to another instead of reading straight through. Now, she returned to the beginning.

She was only a few turns from the start when a stanza caught her eye. Sucking in a sharp breath, she immediately spread the pages and scanned the section.

*That ship fares from the east:*
*come will Muspell's*
*people o'er the sea,*
*and Loki steers.*

Muspelheim.

The reference alone was enough to bother her, but when it was combined with Loki's name…

It had been almost two hundred years since Jane had first seen the burned handprints in the place now called New England, but only two years had passed since the last sighting. When a carriage bearing the imprint had gone by, she'd all but strained a muscle in her neck doing a double take. It was for that exact reason she'd left Egypt and its sweltering deserts, despite having lived there for less than three months.

The marks were few and far in between – the first ones in Roanoke, a few more in Greece, another in China – but their ominous appearance never failed to set her heart racing while the blood ran a little colder through her veins. Still, handprints were all she ever saw. No footsteps, no scorched earth, no towering giants wreathed in fire and flame. Just handprints.

It was all so confusing, and Loki only made it worse with his evasive half-truths, secretive smirks, and tendency to disappear whenever she started to get frustrated. In the end, she'd decided to keep most of her thoughts and theories regarding the fire giants to herself. It was easier, especially since Loki enjoyed being more of a hindrance than help. And yet, the overlying problem remained.

How was Loki involved?

*If* he was involved.

Jane frowned.

He *had* to be involved.

Somehow – in some way, shape, or form – Loki was tangled up in a three-sided mess that included himself, the fire giants, and Jane.
Originally, she'd been willing to write off the fire giants' presence in her realm as a fluke, a rare occurrence that wouldn't happen more than a couple times, but their continued appearances had dashed that belief. They hadn't shown up just to spread a disease that killed thousands of people. They hadn't shown up in Xi'an just to leave a mark on her window frame. Coincidence could only explain so much, which meant something more was going on.

All roads seemed to lead back to that fateful day in Norway.

But which road held the answer?

"There you are, Adrienne!" Jane looked up at the sound of her temporary name of the last couple years. It took a moment to spot the source: a petite woman, her hand already in the air and trying to draw Jane's attention as she emerged from between two men. "We've been looking everywhere for you."

Following the woman was a boy barely taller than she. He walked with his head high in an attempt to appear older than he was. He was still young enough to be in the grey area between boy and man, and it showed in his gangly limbs.

The pair flopped onto the bench on either side of Jane.

"What are you doing this far from the mercantile district? Don't tell me you're hiding out here just to read again." The woman rolled her eyes at Jane's pointed look. "Monsieur Germain will skin you alive when he finds out, and I will not provide an excuse for you this time."

"Come now, Gisèle… you would leave me to Francois' mercy?"

The woman tucked a stray lock of her platinum hair behind an ear and adjusted her bodice. "It would be no less than you deserve."

"But far more than you're willing to subject me to." With a grin, Jane leaned over and bumped Gisèle's shoulder with her own. "You know as well as I how much of a hassle Madeline can be."

The Germains' young daughter was notoriously challenging, which made Jane's job as the family's governess all the more difficult. Watching Madeline had its positive aspects, of course – free room and board, an endless supply of books, and three square meals a day – but it also had its downfalls, particularly when Madeline decided to throw fits and misbehave.

Ignoring the two women's discussion, the boy reached over to tilt the cover of the book. "Poetic Edda." Pursing his lips in thought, he let the cover fall and sat back. "I can't say I've heard of it."

"Another of Adrienne's scholarly books no doubt." Gisèle issued an exaggerated sigh. "Studying is such a bore. It would be a much better use of your time to simply settle down and find a husband. If you can wait, Laurent will be eighteen in just two and a half months."

Laurent continued to disregard his sister. "What's it about?"

"It has absolutely nothing to do with political affairs or wartime strategies, so it's unlikely to interest you." Jane gave him an apologetic smile before returning to Gisèle and their earlier conversation. "And now there's not only Madeline but the Germains' newest addition."

"What was her name?"

"Sophie. So I have not one but two Germain children to watch over. Surely a single day of leaving the girls with their mother doesn't warrant all that."
Gisèle sniffed. "It wouldn't if it was just a single day. What is this now, the hundredth time?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Gisèle." Laurent to the rescue. He was as level-headed and grounded as his sister was dramatic and over-the-top. He was also one of the few that weren't afraid to sass Gisèle. The rest of Paris was too enamored with her fair skin, glossy hair, and general breathtaking beauty to even think of talking back. "What is it a study of?" He touched a finger to the book's spine. "Poetry?"

"Honestly, Adrienne, how can you expect to stay in Francois' good graces when you avoid him all the time? It's no wonder you're always in trouble."

Speaking of trouble… with her two companions carrying on different conversations, Jane was having a hard time keeping them straight.

Laurent was asking about the book's contents again – Literature? Fairy tales? – Gisèle was asking about her reading habits again – I don't understand how you can spend the entire day with your nose in a book when there are so many better things you could be doing; like taking on a suitor – the people on the street in front of them gossiped about the growing rumors off the trade ships – I heard the states have declared independence from England; they mean to go to war – and beside her, the shop's bell continued to announce the coming and going of each visitor with an annoying ring that was about to drive her absolutely mad.

Jane held up her hands, and while she couldn't control the whole of Paris, at least Laurent and Gisèle fell silent at her gesture.

She looked to her left. "The book is about the Nordic gods and the legends surrounding them." She looked to her right. "I can't stand to be cooped up inside all day. If I have to suffer for my unruly behavior, so be it." Then she leaned against the glass, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

In the continued quiet following her explanations, Jane could almost hear the nonverbal discussion occurring between the siblings, a dialogue of silent mouthing, hand motions, and raised eyebrows. A few seconds later, the bench creaked as Laurent stood and muttered a goodbye. His sister, however, remained.

"I owe you an apology, Adrienne. What I said was out of line." Jane opened her eyes in time to see the dark blue of Laurent's winter overcoat disappear into the crowd before Gisèle's nervous fidgeting beside her caught her eye. "Between your parents passing when you were young and you having to make it on your own, you've had a hard time of things, and I have absolutely no right to tell you how to live your life. It was callous and rude of me to say anything."

Along with her beauty, Gisèle was well-known for being a pampered banker's daughter. Brat was too strong of a term to describe her personality. Headstrong was more fitting. Still, few people knew that her candor stemmed from a genuine concern for others. That was why Jane never let Gisèle's outspoken nature get to her because, in all honesty, it just meant she cared.

"There’s nothing to forgive. I know you only mean well." Jane nudged Gisèle again and was rewarded with a bright smile, an expression that looked more at home on her face than the anxious one she’d been wearing. "Even if I was offended, you know I can never stay upset with you for long."

"Thank the Lord for that. Without you, I'd be forced to gossip with Victoire, and you know how I can't stand her." She paused. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes." Jane gave her a reassuring pat on the leg.
"Well, on that note, I'll take my leave. I don't know about you, but I want to be there the minute the carriage arrives." She wrapped the edges of the fur-lined cloak firmly around her arms. "You'll be coming, yes?"

"I'll be along in a moment. Don't worry, I'll find you."

Jane watched the young woman disappear into the crowd in the same direction Laurent had earlier. In fact, a good majority of the Parisians were headed the same way, winding through the streets towards the towering spires of Notre-Dame. Evidently, her parting words to Gisèle would be a lie. It was going to be impossible to locate the siblings in the mass of people that were apparently going to be there. Regardless, Jane gathered her things.

It wasn't every day that Paris received an ambassador from a rebellious country, and she had no intentions of missing it.

Before long she found herself in the crowd, maneuvering her way to a location where she'd be able to see, a challenge in itself with her short height. She was squished between a middle-aged man with a beard that kept getting in her face whenever he looked around and a woman holding a screaming baby when she heard a lilting voice in her ear.

"What an exquisite dress. Although, I still prefer the one you wore in Rome."

The close proximity made her start and fall forward against the man in front of her. She issued a quick apology before turning around. "What are you doing here?" It didn't matter that he assumed someone else's visage, the voice – and knowledge of her past whereabouts – was Loki's.

"Hello to you, too, Jane."

Normally, she would've returned the greeting, but she was too busy scanning everyone within hearing distance for people she might know. It wouldn't do for someone to overhear him calling her Jane when she was supposed to be Adrienne. Seeing no one she knew, she was willing to let it slide.

"Is standing around in masses the norm now or is there a purpose to this congestion?"

That, however, she couldn't ignore.

Apparently, neither could the woman beside her. Having overheard the question, she moved her baby to the other hip and looked up to Loki with obvious incredulity. "We are here to see Monsieur Franklin. He brings news from the newly declared United States of America."

The man in front of her peeked over his shoulder at them. "Have you been living under a rock, my good man?"

Fighting the blush that warmed her neck and cheeks, Jane avoided everyone's eyes, grabbed Loki's sleeve, and began to tug him back to the edge of the crowd. The material was pulled from her fingers when a stranger slipped between them, but she quickly reached for it again. Instead of coming into contact with the fabric, though, her hand found his.

They continued to weave their way through the throng until they finally cleared the last line of people and stood in a shaded alcove between two buildings. Only then did she release him. She waited for his appearance to shift back into the pale skin and dark hair she knew so well before speaking.

"If you're going to ask foolish questions, can you at least wait until we're alone?"
"I merely asked if there was a reason we were there." Loki appeared to be genuinely confused.

"With the entire city aware of what's happening today, it was strange for you not to know." Leaning over, she glanced around him to make sure no one was close enough to hear them. "And you can't just use my name like that. You know I have to change it. People here know me a certain way. I'm Adrienne, I'm a governess, and I came from a remote area of France. You can't just show up saying something different. Unlike you, I can't just disappear into thin air. If you give anything away, that means trouble for me."

"My apologies."

"They could… wait, what?" The hand that had been gesturing dramatically as she talked froze. "Either I'm hearing things or… did you just apologize?"

Loki gave her a sardonic look. "I'm not in the habit of repeating myself." Which meant she had heard correctly. A little taken aback, Jane endured his glare, her thumb tracing a repeated path across the palm that had been pressed to his. "Now, again, why is everyone gathered to see one individual?"

"Since when are you interested in human politics?"

"Jane…" If his tone wasn't warning enough for her to answer, the second look he shot her way was.

"The territories that were founded under Great Britain have rebelled and declared their independence. Rumor has it that they'll be going to war soon. That's why Monsieur Franklin has come, to request aid for the upcoming battles." In the background, the volume increased as a carriage pulled into view. "Speak of the devil."

They both watched as a man stepped out of the carriage. "So this realm is entering yet another war?" Jane hummed a response while Loki continued to watch the man enter Notre-Dame. "You mortals are self-destructive to a fault."

"I'm not mortal."

"You humans." Even though he was still focused on the scene, she caught the slight quirk of his lips. "Does that suit you better?"

"Yes, but it's no less offensive."

When he turned around, he regarded her intently. "It's a wonder this realm survives as well as it does or that any of you are still alive with the way you're constantly fighting. You completely disregard your ancestors' experiences."

Jane merely shrugged. War had stopped affecting her long ago. "What can I say, we're a stubborn lot." Then she grinned at him. "You really should try to lighten up sometimes. Look for the positive instead of only seeing the negative, smile more, actually have fun… you know, things normal people do."

"You make it sound as if I'm abnormal." It was one of the few times she'd heard him actually sound offended, but she waved it off.

"Anyway, if you don't have any other people to bother this evening, you could join me. I was going to watch the stars." She glanced up to the gloomy, overcast sky. "If the clouds clear out, of course."

"They would be dull."
Hands on her hips, she chastised him. "You don't know that, Loki. If you give it a chance, you might enjoy it."

But he just shook his head. "Doubtful." Then, without warning, he vanished, and Jane was left staring at an unfamiliar man that gaped, mouth slack and eyes wide, at the spot Loki had been. He blinked a couple times and looked down at the whiskey bottle clenched in his fist before setting it down in the middle of the street and walking off, hand to his head.

"I don't want to go to bed."
"I'm sorry, but you have to."
"But you get to stay up. It's not fair!"
"Life isn't fair, Madeline."

Jane tucked the sheets around the young girl and ignored her whining pleas. One day when she had more responsibilities and less energy, Madeline would get excited at the thought of a good night's sleep. For now, she would use her lack of responsibilities and abundant energy to wreck Jane's.

This wasn't her first time as a governess. However, it was the first time she'd been cursed with a charge like Madeline. Unruly and stubborn to a fault, the girl was on a fast track to ruining all children for Jane and making her give up being an instructor for good. The Germains had their work cut out for them if they ever wanted to present her to society as a proper young lady.

"Will you tell me just one more story?"
"Not tonight."
"Then at least tell me that we're finished studying mathematics." Madeline worked an arm from beneath the covers and pointed at the book on the nightstand before draping it dramatically across her forehead. "None of my other governesses ever used Montucla, and I don't know if I can stand another minute of his ramblings about Archimedes."

Jane closed her eyes and mentally counted to ten. "You still have quite a bit to learn on the subject. I thought Montucla might be helpful, but if I promise to put his works aside until next week, will you stop fidgeting and go to sleep?"

Really, there was no use in promising a week, not when all she needed was two more days. By nightfall on Saturday, she would be aboard a ferry, headed down the Seine to Le Havre. But an entire week was more convincing than a couple days and enough to get Madeline's eager nod. If living ten lifetimes and assuming what seemed like hundreds of personas had taught her anything, it was how to get what she wanted. Jane wasn't above bribery.

"Goodnight, Madeline." Brushing the short bangs out of the way, she kissed the girl's forehead before moving to the opposite side of the room and pressing another kiss to the child in the bassinet. "Goodnight, Sophie."

The latch clicked softly when she closed the door but sounded loud in the empty hallway. Lamplight shone up the stairs to her right from the living area below where Monsieur Francois was probably
slumped over the dining table while Mademoiselle Marie dutifully refilled his glass with more brandy. Duty would have her go down to report that the children were in bed, but to hell with duty. Francois was an infamously mean drunk, anyway.

Jane padded down the hall, briefly entering the study to replace Montucla’s *L'Histoire* on one of the bookshelves before retiring to the sanctuary of her bedroom. She didn't stay there for long, though. A heavy, wool coat was snatched from the bedpost and slung about her shoulders as she opened the window, peering up and down the street below.

There was no sign of anyone.

Earlier that day, the streets teemed with people wanting to see Monsieur Franklin. The vast majority of them had cleared, but even now, it wasn't late enough for the streets to be as deserted as they were. Usually, there would still be at least a handful of people roaming around. If she had to guess, the frigid temperatures had everyone huddled around the fires in their hearth. Everyone except Jane, that was.

Instead of rekindling the low-burning fire in hearth, Jane stepped onto the windowsill and swung out onto the trellis that scaled the outer wall of the house. With practiced skill – she'd maneuvered the latticework more times than she could count – she climbed the few feet to the top of the building, pulling herself over the edge when she reached it. She carefully spanned the sloping roof, brushed the snow from the raised area nearby, and crawled onto it. Then, lying on her back and crossing her arms beneath her head, she gazed up at the sky.

Stars shone overhead, diamonds in the darkness, each one surrounded by a glowing halo of light. They moved in an endless, circling dance that was almost impossible to see, telling stories with their constellations. Down, closer to where her shoes poked at the atmosphere, was a waning sliver that was the moon.

Jane took a deep breath.

The sky was always most beautiful on the coldest nights.

She'd found her way to the rooftop not long after becoming the Germains’ governess. The tall buildings of Paris did an excellent job of obstructing any clear view of the sky she might have had, so getting higher than as many of them as she could had been her only option. Needless to say, it worked.

At the sound of crunching snow, Jane tilted her head back to see Loki a little ways behind her. He stood in profile, not staring at her or Paris or the roof beneath his feet, but up at the sky. She observed him for a minute, the way his customary dark clothing bled into the dark background even as his fair skin stood out against it.

"I thought the stars of this world were too dull for you to watch."

"They are."

"Then why are you here?" When the question was met with usual silence, Jane turned away and breathed a laugh, her exhale making a foggy puff in the air. "Fine. It's not as if I actually expected an answer."

The snow crunched again, this time closer. "Are you not cold?"

"Oh, I'm definitely cold…" She sniffed. The air was making her nose run, not to mention the chilly rooftop beneath her was starting to seep through her wool coat and give her goosebumps. "But it's
worth it to see this." Her hand swept across the expanse of twilight.

"If you think this is striking, you would be amazed at the Realm Eternal."

"That beautiful?"

He issued a hum of affirmation. She was still trying to think of something to say that would fill the silence between them when he moved into her line of sight, and she discreetly watched him climb onto the platform beside her. Unlike her, however, Loki sat upright, elbows propped on his bent legs and hands loosely clasped between his knees.

In all the times they'd been around each other throughout the years, it was the most casual he'd ever looked. Jane couldn't help but openly stare at him. All of the rigid posture and bold swagger was gone, and in its absence, he looked so… normal. Which didn't make sense because, no matter what he looked like, he was still the God of Mischief.

Their eyes met for a moment.

Then, just as quickly, they broke apart, and he let his head fall back.

Despite having been caught staring, Jane didn't look away, just continued to watch him watch the sky. The angle prevented her from looking into his eyes, but she could clearly see the moonlight mirror on their surface.

"May I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

As surprising as his invitation was, it was, by no means, a pledge to answer. Even still, the fact that he openly bid her to ask was promising. "You made the comment earlier about humans being self-destructive. I was just wondering if war is as common in the other realms."

"My observation was that humans tend to be more prone to warfare than others."

"I take it that's a no?" She took his sideways glance as confirmation and decided to press her luck. "Are they very different than ours?"

"War is inevitable, Jane, and although the location and weapons may vary, conflict is still conflict. The end result remains the same."

When she swallowed, memories were thick in her throat. "Death…"

"Yes." The moon's reflection shifted as his eyes lowered and refocused on some point in the distance.

"Have you been involved in many of them?"

At that, he paused, turning to fix her with a keen stare. "Why do you wish to know all this?"

Jane's attention drifted back to the sky as her shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. "I'm just curious. You've been able to observe me whenever you like, which means you know practically everything there is to know about my life." She pulled an arm from beneath her head to toy with one of the buttons on her coat. "Meanwhile, I've pretty much been left in the dark when it comes to yours."

"And knowing whether or not I've been involved in the disputes of other realms helps you to understand me?"
"No, not particularly, but at least I could say I know something about you." The struggle to keep all traces of frustration from her voice meant the words came out sounding more earnest than anything. "Plus, you told me I could ask so…"

"Let it be known that you ask entirely too many questions."

"Well, it's hard not to when you've remained a relative enigma for the entire time I've known you."

They slipped out of the conversation as easily as they’d slipped into it. Another bout of silence surrounded them in the aftermath, a constant companion to their interactions. For two mature adults, they were worse than children when it came to talking to each other.

In four or five days, Jane could cultivate an easy relationship with people when she moved to a new place. In seven hundred years, Loki and Jane were still trying to move past square one.

"I don't know if I'll ever understand you." She gave a pensive sigh. "Why are you here, Loki?"

The question was too direct. She shouldn't have asked. It had been acceptable in the beginning because he'd only just arrived, but their conversation had grown too tense to allow it now. And the fact that she knew she shouldn't have asked it before the words even spilled from her mouth meant she'd have no right to be surprised when he disappeared like he always did when things became uncomfortable.

But he didn't disappear.

He didn't stand. He didn't look at her. He didn't vanish into thin air, back to the Realm Eternal. He didn't even so much as twitch one of the fingers still dangling between his knees. He just sat there, as silent and still as she'd ever seen him, the only movement being the rise and fall of his back as he breathed. She watched the firm expanse expand and contract, heard the leather that covered it creak with one particularly deep inhale. And just when she was about to give up on the conversation and return to her room, he spoke.

"I've been a part of more wars than I care to remember."

Jane liked to consider herself an adaptor, someone capable of rolling with whatever came her way. It was a trait she'd picked up after the ninth or tenth relocation. But Loki's return to their earlier topic left her temporarily stunned and incapable of forming anything more than an unintelligent "What?"

"Wars. They're not enjoyable." His eyes remained fixed on the sky overhead, but his head canted towards her, a slightly teasing smirk on his lips. "Try to keep up, Jane."

She floundered for a moment. "I… I don't… I'm not—"

He smoothly interrupted her sputtering. "While the other realms don't experience strife as often, when it does occur, it tends to be much more… significant." Sitting up, she watched him carefully as he talked. "Wars in Midgard usually span less than a decade, but I've been involved in some that lasted hundreds of years."

Jane felt the same kind of trepidation talking to Loki as she had hunting wild game in her youth, a kind of hesitance when approaching a skittish animal while trying not to startle it. It was like walking on eggshells in which a wrong move on her part would send him back to Asgard for any number of years. So she took great care in gathering her thoughts before speaking.

"If you participated in that many, you must have been a member of the military?" Noticing the way his forehead crinkled at the unfamiliar term, she clarified. "A soldier in their army?"
It wasn't the first time she'd wondered what Loki's rank – or anyone's, really – was in Asgard. How did gods wile away millennia? What was everyday life like in the other realms? Jane imagined that holding the same career would get dull after the first century or so.

"I may be a warrior and a defender of the nine realms, but that isn't my primary position. There are many who dedicate themselves to the Realm Eternal's forces as Einherjar, but I am not one of them."

"What is your position?" His head turned just enough for their eyes to meet. The look was unmistakable – she wouldn't be receiving an answer to that question – so she rerouted. "Why did you take part in the wars if you're not a member of their military?"

"I'm obligated to do so."

"Why?" Again, all she received was a sideways glance and a mysterious smirk, forcing her to backtrack once more. "Did you lead the warriors?"

He turned to face her fully as she sat up completely, a single eyebrow lifting. "You assume I'm skilled enough to command others when you've yet to see me in battle?"

"Oh… well, I just figured… I mean, you obviously have experience… you said you'd been in quite a few of them… and if they last that long… you're also skilled in sorcery… it must be helpful…"

Loki let her stammer for an unnecessarily long time, and with each awkward passing second, her cheeks flushed more and more. The question had seemed innocent enough. However, his expression made her think that she'd inadvertently offended him.

But then he laughed – he laughed – and Jane trailed off, dumbfounded.

It was authentic and genuine, and the typical mischievousness that was always laced through his chuckles in the past was nonexistent. The sharp angles of his face smoothed away, the mysterious edge to his existence eased, his mouth stretched in a wide grin. He looked like a completely different person. He looked almost… human. The realness of it had Jane smiling as well.

Was this Loki when he wasn't putting on fronts or airs? Was this the person he kept hidden beneath his secrets and lies and tricks?

It was fascinating, captivating, mesmerizing.

"You are notoriously easy to fluster, Jane. Not to mention, your eloquence this evening has been astounding." The surreal circumstances helped her disregard the comment. That, and she was still staring at his profile in something akin to awe. "I suppose my position could be considered a commander of sorts. The Warriors Three, Lady Sif, my brother, and myself are among the highest —"

Loki could have explained the secrets of the universe in the following minutes and Jane wouldn't have heard a word of it because her mind had stopped, fixated on the one word she never would've expected to hear. "Did you say brother?"

"—rankings of warriors and often lead the forces during—"

"You have a brother?"

"—disputes among the realms, so we're—"

"You never told me you had a brother." Not that he'd ever told her much of anything but that was
beside the point.

A little mystified, he looked at her. "I'm trying to explain how a group consisting of the greatest warriors in the nine realms leads Asgard's troops into battle, and you're fixated on the fact that I have a brother?"

"One, it's hard to believe you have a brother. For some reason, I always assumed you were an only child." She held out a hand, marking the points off as she went. "Two, you can't blame me for being surprised when this is the first time you're actually sharing details of your life. Unless you're lying…" Jane narrowed her eyes. "Are you lying?"

"No."

"Were you lying just then?"

"No."

When she groaned, Loki grinned all the more. "How am I supposed to believe that?" She waved a hand, not leaving any time for him to answer. "Nevermind, it doesn't matter. And three, isn't it a bit cocky to include yourself in the group of so-called greatest warriors in the realms?"

"I'm not cocky, just self-assured."

"Is there a difference?" Again, she left no room for him to answer. "But back to the main issue: you have a brother?"

Loki issued a long-suffering sigh. "Yes, I have a brother. Older by several years, his name is Thor and he—"

"Wait…" She held up her hands as if that would help her mind process everything. "Thor as in Thor, the God of Thunder?"

"It's interesting to know that Midgard still remembers his title even though it's been many years since he last came here."

If the situation had been surreal before, it had now taken a turn towards being truly bizarre. "My great-grandfather used to tell me stories of gods, but he only ever mentioned Thor by name." She'd always thought he was only exaggerating, but now…

"Mortals always were more prone to remembering him because of his abilities." The carefree tone from before had declined, replaced by something a little more bitter. The underlying implication that Loki was less remembered was obvious.

Jane was trying to think of the best way to let him know people knew of him – the author of the Poetic Edda had to have heard about him from somewhere or else he wouldn't have been included – when her attention was sidetracked by another thought.

"Thor is Odin's son…"

"You're not so familiar as to call Odin by name. The All-Father would be more appropriate."

One line of thought led to another, and she followed the trail of breadcrumbs eagerly as everything fell into place. "So if you're Thor's brother, that would make you another of the All-Father's sons, and therefore…"
"A Prince of Asgard." Loki lifted his chin a bit, the regality that permeated his very being now undeniable.

Jane choked on air.

Even though she'd already come to the same conclusion, hearing it stated so blatantly made it all the more real. How had she missed it? Looking back, it was so evident. But then, she hadn't really missed it because she'd always recognized the noble way he carried himself. It had just been easier to dismiss as haughtiness when she didn't know anything about him.

However, now she knew that it was haughtiness borne by an aristocratic upbringing, and that small bit of knowledge threw all the snarky, demeaning comments he'd made throughout the years into startling clarity. Pretentious royals. But pretentiousness aside, the fact remained that Loki was a royal.

She schooled her features into one of mock horror even as she fought the smile that made her lips twitch. "So every time I've talked back to you, I've been rude to a prince."

"Consider yourself fortunate. People have died for less."

"What a comforting thought." When he arched a brow, Jane was the picture of innocence. "What I meant to say was that, indeed, I'm lucky to have received your princely pardon for my unwitting comments." He returned the crooked grin she shot his way as she laid down. "That must be one of the few benefits to being your experiment."

"There are only a few?"

"Constantly uprooting my life to start a new one makes it hard to actually live a life in the first place."

Still sitting in the same position, Loki twisted to continue looking at her, but Jane resolutely avoided his eyes and stared at the sky. "I thought you were coming to terms with your immortality."

"I was." She paused. "I am." Then she blew out a heavy breath. "I don't know. After all these years, it never gets any easier. Every time I go to a new place thinking it couldn't possibly be as hard to leave as the one before. I tell myself to keep my distance and not get attached, but I always end up doing it anyway."

"What happened to the Jane that insisted she couldn't go through the years without forging bonds with people?"

"I think I lost her somewhere in the fifteenth century." The material of Loki's surcoat scratched against the roof as he shifted, turning to face her. "She's still there, though, deep down. The mentality may be gone, but my actions are still the same. Even now, the thought of leaving Gisèle and Laurent hurts. It's a constant struggle between what my heart hungers for and what my mind says is best." Jane pressed a hand to her chest, felt the beating beneath the layers of wool and cotton. "I think that's why humans were never meant to live forever."

Loki appeared to consider her words, lips tightening, head tilting. "Eternity isn't bad if you have someone to share it with."

Instantly, Jane's eyes flicked to his. It was a cruel thing to say considering she had no one, but his expression implied that, for once, he hadn't meant it unkindly. He was just being truthful. She didn't have anyone. No one she could spend the years with, no one in whom she could confide the details of her situation. The only person in her life that was unchanging, who could even remotely fill those roles, was Loki.
It was the truth.

But that didn’t make it any less painful.

"Perhaps." And since he was the only constant she had and because she was feeling abnormally melancholy, she spoke without thinking. "Will you ever stop coming to see me?"

If the words surprised him, she couldn't tell. "I recall being informed of how irritating I am quite frequently. Could it be your feelings have changed?"

"I didn't say that." In that stretching moment of hesitance, she heard him snort, but then she took a shallow breath and reiterated, the words coming out in a whisper. "Would you stop?"

Jane shouldn't have asked again. It was another one of those questions that were a little too direct, a little too probing. They were the kind that wormed their way through the delicate strands of the – Acquaintanceship? Comradeship? Friendship? – that Loki and she had created and made it complicated. Because when that invisible line between knowing someone and knowing someone was breached, the security disappeared and both people were left exposed.

Vulnerability had never sat well with either of them.

Wisdom was something that came with age. Or at least, that was what her father used to tell her. But Jane was a living, breathing example of just how wrong he was. Seven centuries and she was still trying to figure it out.

"It is impossible to tell what the future holds."

"Is that a yes?"

"No." His eyes darkened until they didn't resemble the cold grey-green of winter so much as the turbulent grey-green of an ocean wracked by a thunderstorm. "But it's not a no either."

They remained there for a long time after that in silence, Jane lying flat on her back watching the stars while Loki sat beside her doing the same. The moon was high in the sky when he finally left. And it was only with his disappearance that the frigid air returned and she was left wondering when he'd warmed the air around them without her noticing.

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – the Germains' newborn daughter that was briefly mentioned earlier in the chapter would grow up to be Marie-Sophie Germain, one of the first women mathematician, physicist, and philosophers. Her drive to study and become more than just the typical eighteenth century French woman began at the age of thirteen when she read L’Histoire des Mathématiques by J. E. Montucla, the very book Jane left on the Germains' bookshelf before she left.

Jane Foster: influencing physics since 1789.

Also, Benjamin Franklin’s appearance was a real event. After the United States declared their independence, he travelled to France to ask for their help in the American Revolutionary War that followed. Still upset by their defeat at the hands of Britain, the French were willing to help the Americans for the chance at some revenge.
Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Seven

“There is something secret burning in your heart, and I can smell the smoke.”

1812: Russia

"They're coming!"

A boy – thirteen, fourteen at the most – sprinted down the street, one hand holding his hat in place while the other pumped at his side. The scarf looped loosely around his neck caught on his arm, but he flung it back, letting it flap in his wake like a flag, a call to arms. Its fibers, once a brilliant red, were now greyed and dirty and smudged with soot.

"So, the bastards refuse to give up."

An older man wearing the traditional jacket of a Russian army lieutenant general decorated with medals and regalia watched the boy run past. He rubbed his chin in thought while a younger man at his side stood at attention, waiting for an order.

"The Emperor was wise to evacuate." The boy's repeated exclamation could be heard even as he disappeared around a corner. It echoed eerily through the quiet, deserted streets. "Rotten luck for the poor souls who remained, though."

The lieutenant general glanced around to the faces that had appeared in the windows and doorways down the street at the commotion. His attention landed on a woman who hastily ushered the child clutching at her skirts inside. As she shut the door, another young face at one of the windowpanes disappeared.

"Set the rest of the fires. Destroy everything." The corporal moved to turn but paused at his commander's added words. "And release the prisoners." Then he nodded sharply and marched off to deliver the word.

Meanwhile, two stories above the men, Jane withdrew from the open window where she'd been eavesdropping.
Standing in the middle of her room, she stared out at the city that would soon be consumed by fire. At the moment, most of the rooftops were still covered in a white blanket of snow. However, that was only a peaceful illusion. It wouldn't take long for the snow to melt as the buildings charred and blackened, collapsing in on themselves, burying any useful supplies that hadn't already been looted or burned beneath the rubble.

It was a bold move, setting fire to their own city, but it was the most strategic decision that could've been made in the face of Napoleon's campaign. The French were just too powerful. Even with the element of surprise on their side, they'd been powerless to stop them. The rumors of how many died at Borodino seemed to increase daily.

Movement caught Jane's eye, and she blinked and refocused on a pale, frightened face through the window across the street. All the people she'd seen while leaning out the window had looked like that. She probably looked like that. Wide eyes, fearful expression. Skin just as dirty and soot-covered as the boy's scarf. The only difference was the scarf couldn't express panic whereas the faces were deathly pale beneath the filth.

They wouldn't be pale for long, though.

Not if they didn't get out of the city in time.

The first traces of smoke wafting in from outside spurred Jane into action. She jerked at the scent and began grabbing items with purpose, throwing them into a knapsack. A spare set of clothes and undergarments, a couple wool blankets, her heaviest winter coat, a roll of bandages, and — after rummaging through the pantry down the hall — a couple loaves of bread, a wedge of cheese, a handful of cured beef strips, and a canteen filled with water.

It didn't seem like she'd taken very long to gather her things, but just as she hefted the bag over her shoulder, she heard the first scream. The sound shattered the otherwise quiet atmosphere, harsher than nails on a blackboard. It curled through the air and halted her movements, and in the emptiness that followed, Jane gritted her teeth against the deafening silence. But when another scream sounded, she moved.

She half-ran, half-stumbled down the stairs, crashed through the sitting room and the foyer, and reached out to open the door only to jerk back with a hiss as the intricate design on the doorknob was branded into her palm.

The rush of adrenaline dulled the pain but couldn't prevent her stomach from tightening at the sight of the now puckered, blistered flesh. Still, there was no time to waste. Tearing a strip from one of the jackets on the nearby coatrack, Jane wound the fabric around her hand and tied it off using her teeth. Already, the skin felt swollen and stiff beneath the makeshift bandage, but at least it was protected from the elements.

Picking up her bag, she eyed the door, this time taking in the flickering flame shining through the sidelights, the smoke rolling in beneath the door, the way the very air seemed to shimmer with heat. All signs that indicated she'd have to find another way out.

Jane backed away, catching herself against the wall when she stumbled over a side table she'd knocked over. "Very well." Pushing off, she ran down the hall to the back door that led to the alleyway behind the house.

Along the way, her knapsack bumped a pedestal outside the dining room and sent a porcelain vase toppling to the floor. It sounded like it shattered into a thousand slivered pieces, but she didn't turn around to check. There was no one around to care, anyway. She was the only one left in the house,
had been for days.

Earlier that week, the majority of Moscow had left, retreating into the wilderness beyond the city. Those who remained were either unwilling to face the reality that was Napoleon and his approaching Grande Armée or were too low on the civilian hierarchy to accompany the rest of the Muscovites. Jane fell into the latter group. She wasn't as unfortunate as some – the serfs fared the worst – but there was no room for a charity case cook among the Chesnokov family that had taken her in. They would be doing well to survive the trek on what little they'd been able to take, especially with winter setting in.

She reached the back door without any more stumbling or knocking anything over. Remembering her earlier mistake, she held her hand a few inches away from the doorknob, testing to see if it felt warm. When she felt nothing out of the ordinary, she tapped the brass once briefly, twice a little longer, and then grasped it on the third, realizing it was cool to the touch. She opened the door without hesitation and exited the house just as the windows by the front door imploded from the heat outside.

A quick scan of the alley revealed it to be empty. There was no sign of anyone else, but the screams in the distance warned that the soldiers had done their work. The rest of the fires had been set. Already, the sky was growing dark with smoke, the haze highlighted by the growing flames below. Thankfully enough, though, the fires hadn't yet blocked off either end of the alley.

Jane breathed a sigh.

She'd wait to sing any full-blown praises because she was a long way from escaping Moscow, but she could still thank the gods for small favors.

Readjusting her pack, she looked left, then right, then left again before taking off at a slow jog to her right. She wasn't quite sure what to expect when she reached the end of the alley, but whatever she'd expected, what she saw as she stumbled out into the middle of the street was much worse. Flames licked at the edges of the buildings, curled out of windows, and snaked across the roads like a living thing, a ravenous animal. The fires that had consumed her village all those years ago in Norway were nothing compared to the ones that now devoured Kitai-Gorod.

Swallowing heavily – already, the bitter taste of smoke burned her throat – she stepped backwards, then jogged backwards, then turned completely and ran. Moscow flew by. Buildings, doorways, windows. Places she'd shopped, eaten, visited with friends. And as she ran, more and more faces entered the blur. Men, women, and children all joined in the mad scramble to escape Moscow before it burned down on top of them.

Navigating was difficult without knowing where the fires had been lit. She had to backtrack more than once when would-be shortcuts only led to walls of flame. It also didn't help that the increasing smoke obscured the streets. The longer she ran, the harder it was to see.

And breathe.

Her lungs burned. They felt scratchy and painfully rough from the smoke that forced her to alternate between gasping for air as she ran and coughing into her arm. After passing through a particularly potent cloud of smoke, she paused long enough to hack out the majority of it – and stifle the natural gag reflex that urged her to empty her stomach on the soot-covered cobblestones – before taking a side road.

She coughed and swiped at her watering eyes.
She tripped on the broken ends of a wooden crate and stumbled into the closest wall.

She tried to ignore the smoke and the fire and the screaming and the pain where the serrated edge of the crate had stabbed right below her knee and just keep *moving*.

And she'd just rounded a corner when she heard it. There was a loud pop, a warning groan… then the whole side of a building was falling towards her. Time slowed. It was like watching her hand disappear into her father's body, like watching another fire consume bound and innocent people. That same type of helpless feeling where she was unable to do anything but watch in horror.

There was just enough time to roll out of the way to avoid having her head crushed.

But there wasn't enough time to move her ankle out of the way of the burning piece of timber that flew off and collided with it.

The initial wave of pain sent white spots flashing at the edges of her sight. They swirled around the embers kicked up by the impact in a complicated, morbid dance. The second wave of pain made her teeth grind as she bit back her shout into a strangled groan. It felt like someone had nailed spikes between the bones that held her ankle together, had spliced them back together only to rip them apart again.

She stared blankly at the collapsed wall that still burned and the arm that jutted out from beneath it. The fingers twitched, the last bit of movement from someone who hadn't gotten out of the way in time. And as she lay there, defeat welled up. Between her hand, her knee, and her ankle, maybe she wasn't meant to make it out of Moscow. Was this supposed to be her fate? Was this the end the Norns had in store for her? After all the years and all the close calls, would it be death by fire?

It was a possibility… but she'd never been willing to surrender without a fight.

The instinct to survive took hold and had her scrambling to her feet. All the movement sent a third wave of pain through her entire leg that eventually centered at her ankle. She wavered there, unsteady on one foot while the other dangled uselessly, and breathed deeply to subdue the spots still dancing teasingly in her peripheral vision. It only took one peek at her already bruised, already swollen, already blistered ankle for her to know not to look at it again.

When her head finally cleared, Jane limped forward. The agony lessened with each step – or either her mind was doing an excellent job of compartmentalizing the pain – and she was able to move a little faster. She made her way through the last few streets, over the bridge that spanned the Moskva River, and continued north.

At first, she wasn't sure if it was real or if delirium was setting in, but when the pattern continued, she said another breathless thank you to whoever might be listening.

It was clean air.

Well, perhaps not *clean* air, per se, but cleaner than what she'd been inhaling. And it only improved the longer she followed the path. The better the air, the more greedily she sucked it in, coughing extra hard to oust the smoke that lingered in her lungs. The cleaner air also provided a better view of her surroundings, something she decided was both welcome and unwelcome when a completely different type of yelling caught her attention.

She looked up to see a group of men ransacking an elegant home. Similar outfits, unkempt appearance… they were some of the prisoners freed by the lieutenant general. Their release was probably meant to cause general mayhem for the French troops, but Jane knew they wouldn't hesitate
to cause trouble for anyone else who crossed their path.

Automatically, she shrunk back into the shadows of the closest alleyway. She peeked around the corner. It was disconcerting to watch the thieves and murderers, but the thought of not knowing where they were was even more so. However, after a glance in the direction she'd come from, she knew she couldn't remain there. The fire continued to spread. She had to keep moving.

Sliding further into the alley, she crossed over to the next street. It was closer to the fires, but at least there was no one in sight. Jane had no intention of becoming one of the prisoner's victims. Still, even though the smoke was thicker, she allowed a small tendril of hope to worm its way through her when she recognized her surroundings. Moscow's border was close.

Unfortunately, that hope was short-lived.

Later, she'd wonder if she would've noticed it earlier had she not been concentrating on the figurative light at the end of the tunnel. But seeing how she was preoccupied, she didn’t hear the telltale shuffling or see the waver out of the corner of her eye or pick up on the unnatural stillness. At that moment, she wasn't aware of anything.

Not until a chuckle cut through her consciousness.

The noise was deep and low, laced with something decidedly unpleasant. It echoed off the abandoned buildings, was redirected by the hazy clouds above Moscow, and coiled through her mouth with every jagged inhale to chase away any ray of hope she'd felt.

Jane skidded to a stop and turned. Back pressed to the wall behind her, she scanned the street, searching for the source of the noise. Empty. She scanned the windows of all the buildings in sight. Empty. She even scanned the sky overhead. Empty.

The eerie silence that had settled over the street had a noise all its own. But neither the oppressive nothingness nor the rushing whoosh of blood in her ears with each heartbeat could drown out the second chuckle. Like the first, it crept around her, crawling across her skin, and her heart pounded all the more for it, thumping against her ribcage like something trying to escape.

It was in the middle of looking from one end of the street to the other that she saw the shadows move.

And when she did a double take to focus on the darkened alley on the opposite side of the street, a shadow within the shadows took form.

It wasn't possible.

It wasn't possible.

But it was possible because she'd known about their existence, seen the signs, heard the stories. She'd recognized that something like this might eventually happen. Possibility and actuality were two very different things, though, and no amount of imagining could've ever prepared her for what reality would be like.

If her heart had pounded earlier, now it raced wildly. Her breaths came just as fast. And she wanted to write it off as a hallucination – she wanted to so very bad – but when the figure shifted again, edging out of the darkness and into the light, it didn't matter that she'd never seen one for herself. She knew it for what it was.

Large hands and feet tipped in hooked claws.
Gleaming, pointed teeth shining from within a cavernous maw.

A molten body, dark and hard and forged from charcoal, glowing lines of magma shining through cracks in the skin.

A fire giant.

Jane had never adopted the Christians' belief in angels and demons, God and Satan, heaven and hell. How could she when the Norse gods of old were real? But right then – taking in the twin horns that arched back from its brow, the volcanic-like crags in its torso that revealed the lava burning at its core, the glowing eyes – it was easy to conceive that fire giants had been the inspiration behind the Devil and his minions.

The giant took one step forward, and Jane felt the reverberations of the impact through the ground, in the wall at her back. Under the being's weight, the cobblestones gave and shattered. At the same time, she jerked, the back of her head colliding with the wall in its own echoing crack.

Her feet shifted of their own accord, but all it did was cause the giant to move towards her with another earth-shaking step and open its mouth, the interior of it glowing with an inner fire as the words spilled out.

"I know you are there."

If it was possible to melt into the wall, she would've gladly done so. Instead, she was forced to meet its gaze as her lungs compressed and she tried not to hyperventilate. Just when she thought she was going to pass out, the giant looked away, scanning the immediate area around them.

"Your attempts at concealment are in vain."

Jane paused. Could it not see her? Was the intense burning of its eyes only a mask to conceal the fact it was blind? It was the only thing that made sense because it couldn't really be considered hiding when she was plastered against a wall in plain view. But when one massive, clawed hand lifted in her direction, she realized the fire giant wasn't speaking to her.

"Let us see if your pet's death will encourage you to reveal yourself."

Fire seeped from the cracks in its skin, twining around its forearm before weaving into a ball of flame that hovered above its palm. Some small, calmer part of her noted that the giant's hand alone was larger than her head. That only proceeded to make the rest of her that much more nervous, though, because the fire grew by the second, to the point it obscured its hand entirely.

The light illuminated the giant's face, highlighting the wicked tilt of its mouth and the sharpened canine that protruded. There wasn't enough time to scream. There wasn't enough time to dodge. There was only enough time for Jane to suck in a harsh breath as the flame left the giant's hand and flew towards her.

Jane closed her eyes.

With a sort of detachedness, she briefly considered what it would feel like to be consumed by an otherworldly fire. Did those of Muspelheim burn hotter than those of her realm? Would death be instantaneous and, perhaps, a little less painful? It certainly seemed that would be true. After all, she could feel the growing heat on her face, could smell the way it singed the tips of her hair.

And she was so absorbed in her thoughts instead of her impending death that it took her a moment to realize she wasn't dead.
Or maimed.

Or hurt.

The heat still burned at her, but when she peeked out through the curtain of hair that had fallen across her face, the ball of fire hovered no more than three feet away. It spun in place, immobile, and she watched it spark angrily, as if it had a mind all its own. In shock, Jane slowly eased out of her cringe to stare outright. Only once her shock began to ebb did she detect the green hue to the air in front of her and the new presence at her side.

The breath she'd sucked in earlier was let out in a heavy rush as she stared up at the ebony hair, the arching cheekbones, the pale profile of the God of Mischief.

"Loki."

The name came out wispy with relief, and at the sound of it, his lips twitched. But he didn't look at her. He continued to stare down the fire giant who now leered back.

Before any of them had time to react, he flicked his outstretched hand and sent the ball of fire hurtling back to collide with the giant's chest. Her hands flew to her mouth as she watched the giant stumble back. The ground quaked with each of its steps. She braced herself against the wall to ride out the tremors, dust and debris falling all around them, and in the distance, a woman screamed.

With another flick of his wrist, a silver dagger appeared in each of Loki's hands, but as soon as she spotted them, they were gone, flying across the space as he stepped forward to throw them in quick succession. The giant roared as they buried deep – one into its arm, the other into its abdomen – and staggered a few more steps before falling.

The ground jumped beneath her feet, as strong as any earthquake she'd ever experienced, so bad that the shuddering wall couldn't hold her and she tipped forward to fall against Loki's back. Apparently unaffected by the tremors, he remained firm even as she struggled for balance, one hand fisting in the surprisingly supple material of his surcoat while the other wrapped around his upper arm.

"I was initially pleased to see you'd found another place to call home, but it appears you've decided on an even worse location. Are you incapable of residing somewhere that isn't in some state of revolution or war?"

Through the shudders, Jane leaned back to glare at Loki, meeting his eyes when he looked over his shoulder. "As if I could control the uprising in France any more than I could control their decision to invade Russia. If I'd have known this was going to happen, I would've chosen somewhere else."

Gradually, the quaking lessened enough for her to feel comfortable releasing him and stand on her own. Not that she'd felt comfortable holding on to him, everything just happened before she really knew what was going on, and it was either that or fall to the ground…

"You humans have an almost innate drive to kill each other off." Loki turned to better look at her, and Jane took another step back for good measure. "I'm not sure which is worse: burning your lands to cripple the enemy or beheading them with that crude machine."

"Some of them deserved it."

His brow wrinkled with a passing frown. "The vast majority of them were without fault."

"That may be so, but Madam Guillotine holds love for no man. Anyway, that's not important right now." She gestured past him to the darkened body still sprawled out on the street. "Are we going to
talk about the fire giant you just killed?"

"I doubt he's dead. If anything, he's only been momentarily disabled."

"It's a he?"

As if on cue, the giant stirred. Jane watched as one massive hand pressed to the ground, rolling the giant onto his side. A rumbling groan increased to a roar that shook the air and rattled her brain. She pressed both hands to her ears in an attempt to block the sound, but the full brunt of the noise returned when Loki grabbed her wrist and led her down the street.

Jane looked back in time to see the ground split beneath the giant's flexed fingers. Claws dug into the earth, sending fissures in every direction, and his head turned, burning red eyes meeting hers, just as Loki pulled them around a corner.

Then she couldn't focus on the fire giant.

She had to focus on running.

Loki's fingers were like an iron band around her wrist, dragging her through the alleys and streets of Moscow at an unrelenting pace. The fact that she was struggling to keep up, limping as she was from her ankle, didn't even seem to register. With every turn, she lost more of her bearings until even she wasn't sure where they were anymore.

As they skidded through another junction, she remembered the time Loki took her to Kidd's treasure on Santa Catalina. "Can't you just transport us somewhere else?"

"No."

"But you said that you were… more skilled than the fire giants."

He paused when the alley they were in split, glancing left and right. "I am." Her shoulder objected when he jerked her to the left.

"Then why… can't you get us… out of here?" She panted, winded. Caught up in fleeing from the fire giant, they hadn't been paying attention to the manmade fires that still consumed Moscow. They'd apparently strayed closer to them because the increasing smoke was making it difficult to breathe again.

"Because."

She frowned. "That's not a reason, Loki!" The words came out louder than she meant, and a distant growl indicated their pursuer was close enough to have heard.

Without warning, Loki shoved her into a niche in the alley nearly hidden in the shadow of the buildings above them. Her back slammed against the brick, and she'd just began to protest his rough treatment when a cool hand covered her mouth.

The pressure prevented her from twisting her face free, so she settled for scowling up at him, breath huffing over the top of his hand with every exhale. Or rather, she glared at the side of his face seeing how his attention remained fixated on the opening to their hiding spot. Thirty seconds passed, then another, before he finally met her narrowed eyes.

"I cannot take us elsewhere. Without dispatching the son of Muspel first, he would only follow us, and you cannot manage the number of leaps between realms that it would take to lose him."
When she squirmed against him once more, he dropped the hand covering her mouth. However, the one on her shoulder that kept her firmly pressed against the wall remained. "Why don't you just fight him then?"

"You believe me to be avoiding battle." He continued to stare down at her, unfazed by her anger.

"How else would you classify what we were just doing?"

They had been running away, plain and simple. But her convictions wavered when Loki issued a twisted sneer and leaned towards her. "Manipulating. There is more to battle than brawn and pure strength."

Having once been a petite Viking warrior, Jane understood just how true a statement that was. Amidst a sea of masculine strength, she'd been forced to rely on speed and cunning to gain deference from her comrades. Perhaps Loki was like her in that respect.

"You think you can run, Asgardian?" The thunderous voice was close now, the tremors increasing as he came nearer. "You think you can hide?"

Jane suddenly found her nose pressed to the hard expanse of Loki's breastplate when he closed the gap between them until virtually no space remained. "What are you doing?"

His body forced her against the wall while his hands rested on either side of her, effectively caging her in. All of her efforts to push at his stomach were in vain. If Loki didn't want to move, there was no way she would be able to force him. Instead, she looked up, her nose going from brushing his chest to his jawline. And despite the seriousness of the situation, Jane felt herself blush.

"Ensuring you cannot do anything foolish."

"Yes, because I had every intention of running out there to fight a fire giant by myself without a weapon." Her sarcasm earned her a sideways glance.

"I can sense you…" The squealing sound of a claw against glass set her teeth on edge. "And I can smell your pet's fear." Swallowing hard, she lowered her head and followed Loki's gaze, staring out at the opening to their alcove. "You cannot escape me, Lie-Smith."

Their foe was so close, Jane swore she could feel the heat emanating from the giant's body, but she still risked a hissing whisper. "What the hell did you do?"

"Excuse me?"

"You've obviously done something to him." It was the reason the fire giant had tried to attack her in the first place. He must have known Loki was nearby even though he'd cloaked himself from her. "Is that why they've been coming here all these years? They're after you?"

"No."

"You have something that belongs to us, Asgardian…"

Jane looked back up at Loki, arching an eyebrow imperiously when he met her eyes. After a long pause, he amended his denial. "Well, not exactly." He sighed at her unyielding expression. "Now is not the time, Jane."

"When would be a good time for you? Because I would love to finally get to the bottom of all this mess." Loki's face darkened at her scathing words, brows lowering over his eyes, but before he
could speak, their attention was drawn to the entrance as the giant's footsteps halted just past the opening.

For one endless moment, the world went still.

Jane's mouth ran dry while her breath came in shallow pants. Her heart thumped so loudly she figured all of Russia could hear it. And even though her body was hemmed between Loki and the brick building, she trembled in a combination of fear and adrenaline. Through the rush in her ears came another set of noises that made Jane's breath catch in her throat and Loki lessen the already nonexistent space between them even more.

A muted shuffling.

The sound coals made when scraped against stone.

A quiet whuff.

A cold chill worked its way down her spine when she realized the fire giant was sniffing them out. Another inhale, another breath, another likeness of a predator stalking its prey, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end when a clawed hand curled around the side of the building.

"Loki…"

His name was more air than substance, breathless and inaudible even in their close proximity. The only acknowledgement he heard her was in his movements. His hand crept between them, pressing against her hip as he soundlessly guided her to stand behind him. When he withdrew his hand and took one step forward, she felt the loss of contact keenly.

But then the dark head appeared. Gleaming fangs, arching horns, skin the color of coal… each feature appeared one by one around the corner until the head turned and fixed them with its glowing eyes.

Jane saw both parties without really looking at either of them. She watched the rest of the giant's body slide into view, one clawed hand summoning fire that curled in a twisting pattern before taking the shape of a long sword. At the same time, she watched Loki's hand twist and transform the air around it into a long spear with a toothed tip.

"You wanted me, demon. Here I am." Loki boldly approached his foe, stopping only when he would've been forced to incline his head to keep the giant in view. "If you leave now, I may spare your life."

The fire giant's jaw split, the thin line of light that burned constantly in its mouth outlining the fervent grin, and through the opening came a hissed exhalation. It was the sound of fire consuming wood, the wind stoking the flame, the eager thrill of battle.

"There is no concession, only death."

Loki's chin lifted. "Then come at me, veiðimaðr."

In that moment, she imagined him to be sporting a challenging smirk. She'd never know for sure, though, because immediately after that, the alleyway exploded into movement and noise. The sword fell, swiping down onto Loki's head, but instead of cleaving him in two, the image shuddered and faded into gold.

Jane jumped and scrambled backwards when the giant roared, her eyes darting to the actual Loki
perched on his enemy's shoulder with the spear buried deep into the giant's back.

"You were right. Only death can come to one who dares threaten a son of Odin." The sword sliced through the air, but Loki wrenched the spear free, bringing with it an arcing trail of blood, before disappearing and reappearing on the rooftop above the giant's head.

"Titles mean nothing to us."

The giant leaped, faster than Jane would've ever thought considering its size. Loki dodged the hand, but when the giant tilted in mid-air, its leg caught one of Loki's and knocked him off balance, sending him crashing to the street outside her view. Instantly, the giant disappeared in the same direction.

"You may think you can evade us, but we will never relent." A spray of blood splattered across the opening. With the giant's roars ringing in her ears, Jane watched the blood melt the cobblestones, steam and smoke rising from the bubbling mess. "We will follow you through the worlds. Track you to the end of days."

"I hope the rest of your kin are quicker than you or it will be a rather dull hunt."

Loki flitted past the opening, but his spear reemerged to connect with the flaming sword in a metallic scream. They both held firm, blades locked together, until he shoved the sword to the side and sent it skittering farther down the street. It was staggering to think he was as strong as the massive giant.

Loki was still out of sight, but she saw another of his daggers shoot out to bury itself in the giant's knee. As the giant stumbled, he used the moment of distraction to bash the blunt end of his spear to his opponent's head and send it crashing through the wall. Loki darted into the opening just as the giant burst from the building in a shower of splinters and wood only to collide with the brick wall on the opposite side of the street as Loki's visage faded again.

"Enough of your tricks, Asgardian. Face me!"

Plastered against the dead end of the alcove, Jane watched the giant lumber into view, looking to either side and up to the rooftops in search of the elusive God of Mischief. As it rotated, blood oozed from the gash in its back and dripped from the myriad of wounds caused by the daggers.

"There is no place we cannot find you."

The air shimmered just long enough for Loki to sink the spear into the giant's gut and drag it upwards before he was gone again. Too late, the giant spun in a circle, one hand pressed to the gaping wound in its torso, the other flung wide to tear paths through the brick and wood walls around it, snarling viciously.

"Running may protect you for the time being, Asgardian, but there are other ways to inflict pain." The giant swayed. And when it dropped to one knee, the world shuddered around her. "We will destroy all that you hold dear."

From empty space came Loki's blasé answer. "Sentiment. Any creature of old should know the futility of it, and yet you believe me to be different."

"I would test the truth of that... beginning with your pet." Jane felt the world tunnel until all she could see was the giant turn to her with its ember eyes and blazing grin and flame-filled hand. "Let us finish what we started, shall we?"

She was going to die. She just knew she was going to die. But then, somewhere in the blurred
outskirts of her narrowed focus, a black figure drew the fire meant for her. There was no way of knowing if the blow struck, though, because it was immediately followed by a wicked growl, a quick motion, and then a laugh as Loki came into view.

Only it wasn't Loki going in for the kill.

It was Loki held firm against the wall, dangling by his throat in the giant's grasp.

Jane gasped and jerked forward, falling to her hands and knees when she tripped over a raised cobblestone. However, the giant remained focused on the prize at hand. It laughed when Loki's hands grasped at its own.

"Is there something wrong, Lie-Smith? Magic suddenly out of reach?" Another dark chuckle sounded when Loki's lip curled. "You may be skilled, but we were practicing the art before your father's father was born. There remain strains of magic even you do not know."

"How flattering, that you feel the need to draw on deep magic to restrain me." He managed to sound surprisingly calm given the situation. "Time is all I need to master that, as well."

"Time?" The giant grinned. "You are out of time. I was to bring you back alive, but your life is not required to retrieve what has been lost. Before I kill you, though, you can watch your pet burn." Fire gathered in its palm as it turned to Jane. "A shame. For a Midgardian, she's quite lovely."

Everything happened so fast.

The fire rushed towards her faster than she could scramble backwards. Around the growing flame, she saw Loki's hand twist, a green-tinted barrier taking form directly in front of her. But it wasn't enough. Before the barrier could cover the alcove from wall to wall, the flame struck. The resulting sparks were like fireworks, but any beauty she might have found in the display was lost when wisps of fire slipped around the gaps at its side.

Jane screamed.

Or she would have had the fire not burned away all the air.

The heat was unbearable. It scorched the tissue that lined her airways and consumed the insides of her lungs like it was fuel, like the carrion birds that circled far overhead would consume the charred remains of the fallen soldiers in the coming days. She tasted fire, acrid and smoky and red, felt the flesh burn, blister, and melt from her bones, saw the white-hot center of it before it burned away her sight.

And through the darkness, through the pain, through the falling feeling as she collapsed, she heard the fire giant roar.

She'd once thought death to be simple.

Now she wasn't so sure.

Because when Jane twitched her fingers, scrunched her forehead, breathed deeply, and opened her eyes to a clear, blue sky, she could still remember what it had felt like to die. Pain. Excruciating,
ceaseless, unbearable pain. A cool wind brushed against her face, but the memory of that burning heat remained like a brand on her skin even now.

Sitting up, she glanced down at herself. She was clothed in trousers and a top similar to something she would've worn in Norway, but it was the smooth skin of her arms at which she couldn't stop staring. She'd watched it darken and peel away to reveal the muscle, sinew, and bone beneath. Just like she'd been witness as her sight faded away into darkness.

And yet here she was… new clothes, skin smooth and whole, both lungs and sight fully operational.

"I took the liberty of removing you from that city." In somewhat of a daze, Jane looked over to see Loki leaning against a palm tree, white sand beneath his feet and waves shhing on the open beach behind him. "I believe this to be near the place you once called Hawaii. I trust you won't take issue with my actions."

Her fingers stroked the skin of the opposite forearm as if to assure herself it was really there. "I'm alive."

"So it would seem." The weight of his regard lifted as his focus shifted to some point in the distance. "How?"

Loki shrugged, nonchalant. "I dispatched the son of Muspel, retrieved you, and brought you here." But then his eyes slid back, flitting over her body before settling on her own. "Healing magic has never been my forte, but you'll survive."

It was an unusual thing for him to say. Loki – mysterious, witty, arrogant Loki – sounded almost modest. To avoid commenting, she looked down. A quick perusal of the skin she could see revealed nothing out of the ordinary. If anything, he'd removed a few marks from the past when he'd molded the flesh back onto her bones.

"There's a small scar on your jaw." Her gaze snapped back to his. "It's all that will remain of your ordeal."

A thousand half-developed thoughts whirled through her mind but only one formed into something she could actually speak. "How did you escape? I thought you couldn't use magic."

"I might not have been quite as… powerless as I made out to be." The easy air that seemed to settle over him was much more typical, as was the crooked smirk.

But just because he was a brilliant liar and his ploy resulted in the fire giant's defeat, it didn't justify what had happened. His bit of fun – or whatever he wanted to call it – had nearly been at the expense of her life. She could have died. She did die. Or came close enough to it that it didn't matter.

Still, it was easy to forgive considering everything else.

Rising to her feet, she soaked in the warm sun for a minute. Then she took a couple steps closer, stopping when she fell under the shade of the palm tree and only a few feet separated them. He met her penetrating gaze without reservation.

"You protected me."

"Yes."

"And you saved me."
"Yes."

Her shaky exhale was lost in the wind, swept away with the tide. "Why?"

At first, she didn't think he was going to answer. She half expected him to disappear as he was still prone to do when things got uncomfortable, although it wasn't quite as often as it had been in the past. His attention flicked back and forth between her eyes, dropped lower on her body, then returned to their original position. But he didn't leave. Not this time.

"I was safeguarding my investment."

Jane stared at Loki – the man, the being, the god that frustrated her and astounded her at the same time – and for once, didn't focus on the ambiguity of what he'd said. She didn't attempt to dissect the meaning, piece together bits of the puzzle to figure out the overall picture. She merely smiled. It was small, barely there, but she knew he'd see it. Just like she knew that he knew she'd see it when his lips quirked almost imperceptibly in response.

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – the fires set in Moscow by order of Count Fyodor Rostopchin were just one of many scorched earth tactics used against Napoleon Bonaparte and his forces during the French invasion of Russia. After the Battle of Borodino, Napoleon arrived in Moscow to find it deserted apart from a few civilians and the prisoners that had been set free to cause problems for the French. He followed the Russians as they retreated into their country, but the harsh winter, his thinly-stretched supply lines, and the fact that he’d lost approximately three hundred eighty thousand soldiers and had another one hundred thousand captured eventually led him to abandon the campaign.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
I keep wanting to go to an every-week updating schedule, but personal issues and real world responsibilities are doing a fantastic job at sucking up all my spare time. We'll have to plan for an every-other-week schedule for now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight

“She’s mad, but she’s magic. There’s no lie in her fire.”

1869: England

Sprawled across the bed and propped up on her elbows, Jane leisurely scanned the page before turning it. The quiet rustling of the pages was lost beneath the noise of daily life in London drifting through the open window. She heard a woman soothe a wailing baby, a shopkeeper yelling at someone from the slums, and the distant sound of Big Ben’s chimes.

Jane turned another page. ”I have a theory.”

”Is it better than your last?”

Pursing her lips, she peeked through her lashes to where Loki sat on the window seat. Even though he appeared to be watching something outside, she knew he wasn't interested in anything the city had to offer. He couldn't fool her with his blithe attitude and responses. It was obvious he wanted to know her thoughts on the subject as badly as she wanted answers.

Unfortunately, Loki was the only party ever satisfied.

Jane couldn't help but voice all her theories or speculations on what might be happening with the fire giants even though he remained consistently quiet on the matter. No confirmations, no hints that she was on the right track. The only thing she ever received was rejection of an idea. Then again, who knew if he was genuinely telling her she was wrong or simply lying to throw her off the right trail. And as usual, anything that involved thinking too much about Loki and his motives gave her a headache.

”All these years, you've come to this realm to make sure I stay safe from the fire giants.”

”Wrong.”

That one had, admittedly, been a long shot. Resting her chin in her hand, she tried again. ”You come
here because you're constantly on the run from them."

"Wrong again."

"Then it's because you're lonely and you enjoy having someone such as me to talk with."

The fingers that had been systematically folding and unfolding a scrap of parchment stilled, and his entire body seemed to stiffen as he sharply turned to her. However, they resumed their task at the sight of her teasing grin. "Still wrong." He relaxed and returned to watching the activity in the street.

"One day, Loki..." Chuckling softly, Jane marked her page, closed the book, and rolled over until she lay on her back. "One of these days, I'll figure you out."

"That would be an impressive feat. Be sure to inform me when you do." The sound of leather moving over itself was the only thing in the silence following his words. That, and the muffled thud of his boots on the hardwood floor. He entered the edges of her sight, his hand reaching down beside her. "What are you reading?"

"The Prose Edda."

The majority of her belongings had been destroyed in Moscow. It had taken her a while to recoup, but the people of Hawaii had been wonderfully accommodating. It was while she was rebuilding her life – and searching for another copy of the elusive Poetic Edda – that she came across its sister novel.

Like the first, it contained all manner of tales regarding Yggdrasil's various realms and the beings they contained, but it was different in the fact that the stanzas had been replaced with more detailed stories. She'd always been partial to narratives rather than poetry, so where the Poetic Edda had snagged her attention, the Prose Edda consumed it. Still, she knew better than to believe anything they depicted.

"It's a collection of tales about the Nordic gods." Turning onto her side, Jane looked at Loki. He stood at the edge of the bed, studying the contents of the open book in his hands, and she stared at the crease that had developed between his brows. "You're in there. Not just you, of course, but you're in quite a few." She absentmindedly picked at a loose thread in the quilt. "They're very entertaining. It's a shame they aren't real."

Their eyes met over the top of the book. "What makes you certain they're false?"

"Did you ever have a second brother named Baldr that you managed to kill with a piece of mistletoe?"

His brow crinkled again. "No." Rising up until she was kneeling on the bed in front of him, she flipped to the story.

Jane waited until he'd reached the bottom of the page before turning to another chapter. "Were you responsible for the Lady Sif losing her golden hair?"

"She's had dark hair her entire life." Grey-green eyes rapidly scanned the story, darting from line to line.

"And what about Sleipnir?"

He blinked, eyes stopping their movement. "The All-Father's mount?" Then he looked up.
Hiding her grin, Jane nodded. The story had become her favorite if only because she'd laughed so hard she'd developed a stitch in her side. "Did you ever have…" The pages rustled as she leaned forward, tilting her head to the side to read the passage. "Such dealings with a stallion that you gave birth to him?"

"What?"

"It also claims you gave birth to a wolf and a snake."

He closed the book with a snap and held it out, and she had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing at his disgusted expression. "I have never and will never do such a thing."

"That's why I told you it wasn't real." She took the book, but slipped off the bed to follow Loki when he retreated back to his seat at the window. "They're not all bizarre, though." Leaning back against the wall beside where he sat, she rifled through the pages. "There's one that talks about the end of the realms and how all the gods perish—"

"Ragnarök."

Her focus snapped away from the story she'd just located. "You've heard of it?"

"Bedtime stories." The piece of parchment from before was suddenly in his fingers again, folding and unfolding and refolding repeatedly. "A tale told alongside those of the jötnar to unruly children to make them behave."

"Were you also a part of the version told in Asgard?"

"I can't say I was. Interesting, though…" But Loki didn't elaborate on what was so interesting. He only exhaled a single laugh. Recalling the way he'd reacted when learning how well humans remembered Thor, it was natural to assume his comment had something to do with how humans thought of him. Then again, who knew with Loki? "Tell me, what role do I play in Midgard's account?"

"You're the primary harbinger."

Fingers tracing the raised pattern on the book's spine, she waited for an answer, a laugh, a dismissal. But there was nothing. Nothing except the hand he held out, silently requesting the book. For one long moment, Jane stared at his long, slender fingers. For the next, she wished she could see his face. Though with him sitting on the window seat, legs stretched out across the rest of it, and her standing behind him, all she could see was the crown of his head. Making sure to keep the book on the correct page, she placed it in his hand.

"Our story claims you will be secured within Jötunheim, held captive beneath a great, venomous snake with only your wife to help you, until the beginning of Ragnarök. Once it begins, you will break free and help lead the fire giants through the passageways between realms and into the final battle."

While Jane talked, Loki studied the story. Only once he'd finished reading did he surprise her by laughing.

"How utterly ridiculous." A green haze surrounded the book as it was relocated to the bedside table. "As if I could ever be held captive by the jötnar or would align myself with the sons of Muspel."

She knew that. The second part, at least. After Moscow, there was no doubting where he stood regarding the fire giants. He'd fought the one who had attacked them, supposedly killed it. As for the
frost giants… well, how different could the two elementals be? Between Loki's magic and general skill in battle, she imagined any opponent would have to be more than proficient to even come close.

Jane straightened and crossed to the wall on the opposite side of the window, ignoring the way Loki's laugh died off when she boldly pushed his feet closer to the window and sat down beside them. She also ignored the pointed look he gave her. A challenge to his princely authority now and then would do him good.

Instead, she leaned back, stretched her feet out, and smoothed the fabric of her dress. They were mirror images – both relaxed against the wall, both with their legs stretched out to each other's side – but since Jane was significantly shorter, she was the only one that had to rearrange her arms so her elbow wouldn't rest on the toes of his boots.

Deciding to lay her hands in her lap instead of trying to dodge his feet – it was only slightly better because she could still feel the boot against the back of her arm – she finally stopped ignoring him.

"What's the version your people tell like?"

"More dramatic. More…” His head tilted to the side, eyes shifting to the street below. "Violent. Children are more inclined to behave if their parents tell them Surtur will snatch them from their beds if not."

Jane frowned. What happened to tales of adventure and heroics, princes and princesses? "That would be a horrible bedtime story." She'd never had the privilege of hearing fairytales as a child, but they'd been incorporated quickly during her first go as a nanny. She certainly never would've thought of frightening her charges into good behavior.

However, Loki just shrugged. "If you ever had children of your own, you might think differently."

"Is that your approach to parenting?"

When his attention flicked back to her, she grinned. "Are you alluding to something, Jane?" She shook her head in denial, adopting an innocent expression, but they both knew the truth. Even so, Loki apparently wasn't willing to acknowledge the subject, choosing to side-step it instead and return to a prior thought. "I must admit… I'm curious as to how the author came about that story. There are too many similarities for him to have concocted it himself."

"Maybe someone from Asgard came here and told him a different version."

"Perhaps."

His tone inferred he wasn't convinced, though, which wasn't much of a shock considering she wasn't either. There seemed little point in a god spreading false tales around her realm when it wouldn't have any real effect. The only outcome would be the individual's knowledge that humans had the story wrong. A completely pointless endeavor. And a little uninspiring, even for a God of Mischief.

Still, the Prose Edda was filled with so many ridiculous stories that she had no problem writing off a single contrasting one. Far more interesting was the idea of other Asgardians coming to Earth because that was exactly what Loki's brooding perhaps had implied.

"Do your people come to this realm often?"

He blinked, brow furrowing slightly at the change in topic. "Not any longer. It was more common to appear to mortals in the past. Thor would summon a little thunder and lightning, I would perform a few feats of magic." His eyes grew distant, unfocused. "They worshipped us as gods."
"As if your ego needs stroking." The quip earned her a sharp look that she avoided by glancing down to the street below. "If the Asgardians wanted our worship, why are you the only one I've ever seen?" If they had been more of a presence, all the horrible acts she'd witnessed over the years in the name of other gods might not have happened.

"There are other issues amongst the realms that draw our attention now."

"But you still find time to come here."

"Yes." The boot still lightly touching her arm shifted marginally, and slowly, her eyes made their way back to his.

"What else do you do when you're in… Midgard?" Even though she'd heard him say it hundreds of times, the word felt strange on her tongue. Then again, there were a great many strange words she'd learned in his company. Midgard, Asgard, Jötunheim, Muspelheim, jötnar, Æsir.

He paused for a moment. "I thought we were discussing the differing tales of Ragnarök."

"There were plenty of stories my parents used to tell of the gods of old that ended up not being true, which is likely what happened with this one. The author probably compiled information and fabricated his own version." Her foot twitched, bumping playfully against his hip since she couldn't quite reach his elbow. "It's just a story. I'd rather know what other things you do."

She stared at him expectantly, waiting for a response. But as the minutes dragged out, she realized he had no intention of answering and bit back a sigh. There were entirely too many secrets where Loki was involved. Still, that didn't prevent her from trying other routes.

"Do you ever visit anyone else?"

The seriousness of his expression faded long enough to flash a smirk her way. "Envy is not a color you wear well, Jane."

Heat crept up her neck at the implication. "I am not jealous." Just saying it made her blanch.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Go visit a thousand other girls. I wouldn't care one bit."

"You believe I only visit women?"

Her mouth worked, but only stuttered responses came out as she floundered to cover the fact that she had assumed that. "No… I just…" The tension building in her shoulders was giving her a familiar headache. "You know what, I was just curious. That's all."

"And you're certain about that?" His grin was pure confidence. Smug, knowing, annoying confidence.

In the face of it, she squared her jaw and lifted her chin. "Quite."

The rest of London carried on like normal while they descended into silence, Loki watching her with thinly-veiled amusement while Jane silently dared him to refute her claim. Not even a bird landing on the ledge outside the window garnered their attention. And even though it was probably only a few seconds, it seemed like much longer before he spoke.

"It's a good thing you have nothing of great importance to hide because you're an atrocious liar." A
retort was on the tip of her tongue – something along the lines of how not everyone could be as good at hiding things as he was – but it was cut off when he continued. "You are the only human I frequent."

A large part of her treated the revelation as inconsequential, carelessly tossing it aside. A smaller part of her filed the information away thinking it might be useful someday. A miniscule part of her couldn't help but feel pleased.

However, none of that was anything Loki needed to know so she covered up her thoughts by fidgeting, slouching down against the window frame and uncrossing her ankles before crossing them the other way. She was still looking everywhere except at Loki when she felt him rearrange the hem of her dress. Her first instinct was to jerk away, but she fought it in favor of observing his actions.

"What are you doing?"

The fabric settled, brushing the tops of her boots. "A portion of your legs were revealed after you moved."

Jane looked back and forth between Loki and the bottom portion of her dress. "And?"

"Asgard certainly doesn't hold to that type of nonsense, but isn't it considered improper in Midgard for women to display any part of their body in such a way?"

He was right. It was considered improper. Growing up in ancient Norway where the women were allowed to wear trousers for better movement in battle had been a blessing she hadn't appreciated at the time. Acclimating to the rest of the world's standard of dress – all stifling corsets and high stockings and long sleeves – had been difficult, to say the least, which was why she didn't always abide by those rules.

"It's no more improper than having a man in my room. We're unsupervised and unmarried…" Jane sighed dramatically. "I can only imagine the rumors that will start if we're seen." Gossip was a favorite pastime of almost every woman in London. Thankfully, none of the people below appeared to have noticed them yet.

"Humans have a penchant for the dramatic. No doubt they would assume the worst."

"No, they would assume you were my lover."

Incredulity was thick in his voice. "That isn't the worst?"

"I don't know… they could always believe us to be married." Loki had followed her line of sight to the street, but when his gaze snapped back to her, she laughed. "I'm only joking. Not about the gossip, of course, or the assumption of our relationship, but a sudden marriage is far from the worst thing they could say. Although you could always use your magic to make them forget they ever saw us."

Jane had no idea if his magic even worked that way, but it sounded sensible. Or as sensible as magic could ever sound considering everything else she'd seen him do.

"That would be a waste of good magic. It could be used on far better things than playing mind-tricks on mortals."

It would have been a reasonable excuse had her thoughts not been effectively sidetracked. "You
know, I have yet to see you play an actual trick on someone." Sitting up a little straighter, she crossed her arms, not caring anymore that her elbow nudged his boots. "For the God of Mischief, you're awfully careful in dealing them out."

He leveled her with a weighty stare. "I am plenty mischievous."

But Jane just grinned. Apparently, she'd found a way to press his buttons, and she wasn't above taking advantage of the little offering he'd given her. "Prove it."

"I don't have to prove anything. Just because you can't see it, doesn't mean—"

"Prove it." A muscle in his jaw jumped and his eyes narrowed, which only made her grin widen. "Unless playfulness is beneath a Prince of Asgard."

"Is it not a requirement for mischief?"

Coyly, she let her attention drift. "You tell me." From the corner of her eye, she watched his shoulders rise and fall in a deep breath, heard the slight rush of his exhale.

All in all, it was rounding out to be a very unique day. Since Russia, things had been different between them. Nothing too extreme, just… different. Their time together was still filled with awkward silences and halting discussions and so many secrets, but on some days – like today – they were able to let all that go. It was nice to know that, when the weight of everything else was gone, what remained were banter, laughter, and fun.

Meeting his eyes, she arched a brow. "So are you going to prove it?"

"I've finally discovered the eventual effects of immortality on a human: common sense gives way to foolishness." With a laugh, Jane shook her head and stood, taking a few steps back when he also rose. "Is this how humans attempt to get their way?"

Thoughtfully, she nodded, tapping a finger to her chin. "It's like using psychology, only backwards."

Loki obviously didn't know what psychology meant, but he hid it well, following the steps she'd just taken in a meandering path. "So you want proof of mischief…" He let the question trail off.

There was a glint in his eyes and a smirk on his face when he turned that made her nervous, but it was too late to back down now. She'd issued the challenge, and he'd never let her live it down if she didn't go through with the consequences. So instead of obeying the common sense that insisted she step away, Jane stepped towards him.

"Yes."

If possible, his smirk grew even more. "Very well." He held out his hand in what little space there was between them.

She saw the motion without looking at it, and hesitated for only a second before slipping her hand into his. Immediately, his fingers folded around hers as he pulled her towards him. Their joined hands pressed to each of their abdomens – his against the smooth fabric of her dress, hers against the firm armor beneath his surcoat – while his other hand settled on her hip.

There was a brief moment where her breath hitched at the feel of his fingers.

Then her breath was stolen entirely as darkness surrounded them.
It was the third time she'd moved through the fabric of space, but it was no less unsettling than the first. If anything, it was more so. Her ears popped under the pressure, the dark void crushed the air from her lungs. And it was all so much that the only thing she could do was screw her eyes closed – or were they already shut because everything was so dark? – and wait for the sensation to pass.

As quickly as the compression began, it ended.

The sudden loss of pressure left Jane gasping for air as she sagged against Loki's chest. At some point, he had released her hand without her knowing. Now both of his hands tightened on her hips to hold her steady while hers curled around the edges of his surcoat.

"That…" The air burned her lungs as if she'd just sprinted around the entirety of London, but she tried to push away the discomfort in favor of reminding her legs what it took to stand on their own. "That was…"

"More intense than the first?"

Forehead still pressed to his chest, she felt the vibration of his words as much as she heard them and simply nodded, not trusting herself to speak just yet after the first failed attempt.

While she waited for the explanation she knew would come, she tried to ignore their inappropriate position. There continued to be the issue of her feet not wanting to support her weight, which left her leaning against him. As mortifying as it was to not be in control of her body, the thought of falling to the ground in an undignified heap was even more embarrassing. It was also the only thing that kept her from pushing away the hands at her waist.

"The longer the path, the more intense the transition. Travelling from one side of an island to another was not far enough to significantly affect you. Your second trip would've been the worst, but you spent it unconscious. This one, though, was… considerably farther than the one you remember."

Letting her head fall to the side, she heard his words with one ear and his heartbeat with the other and took in the snow-covered trees and buildings of her past home. Finland hadn't changed much in three years, but it looked better than it had when she'd left.

Thousands of people had lined the streets of Rovaniemi back then, drawn out to beg by the famine spreading through the land. Jane could distinctly remember the aching, hollow feel of a stomach that had been empty for days and just how unsatisfactory pine bark was as a food source. However, Finland appeared to be rebounding. The people she spied in the distance still had that gaunt look about them – the sunken cheeks and knobby joints – but they weren't dying in the streets anymore.

Gradually, her muscles caught up to the rest of her body and tensed beneath her, and she straightened, pulling away from Loki. He offered no resistance, hands easily falling away as she stepped back. Her legs trembled a bit, still a little unsteady, but she held firm. When she finally got a better look at Loki, though, the loss of concentration almost made her collapse all over again.

"What are you wearing?" Jane glanced down. "What am I wearing?"

It wasn't that she needed to ask so much as the words tumbled out before she could stop them. She recognized the clothing. She'd just never expected to see it on him. Or herself again, for that matter.

Loki was clothed in a pair of black boots, dark pants, and a red and blue patterned tunic while she wore a similarly colored dress. Both of them wore the traditional garb of Finland, for which Jane was thankful considering the six inches of snow in which her boots were currently buried. Still, she was shocked at the loss of her English dress and of seeing Loki in something other than black and green.
"I don't believe Midgardian fashions have advanced to the point of accepting Asgardian ones."

"Well, no, but—"

"And from the look of things, your attire wouldn't have blended well either."

"No, it wouldn't have, but—"

"So what is the issue?"

Jane fixed Loki with a glare and crossed her arms. "I didn't give you permission to use your magic to change my clothes."

Unperturbed, he met her glare with a wide grin. "But you did give me permission to prove I am mischievous." The fact that he always appeared to be happiest when he was getting the better of someone else couldn't be a good sign.

She turned to drink in the familiar sights of Rovaniemi's outskirts. Thankfully enough, everyone went about their daily business, no one having noticed the two individuals who had just appeared from thin air. "Since when is transferring me from one country to another an act of mischief?"

"That wasn't proof enough?"

"Frankly… no." With the initial shock wearing off, her pride returned full force to continue instigating him. "I expected much better from the God of Mischief, himself."

"Hm."

Trembling legs and an awkward moment of closeness hadn't been enough to dissuade her, but his indistinct noise was. She whipped around to find him regarding her thoughtfully. Instantly, she felt tendrils of unease work their way through her, the kind that made her feel as if she'd inadvertently stumbled into a trap. His gaze remained open and amused even as hers narrowed in suspicion. But before she could say or ask anything, a voice came from the direction of the town behind her.

"Kaisa?"

The words stuck in her throat, and nothing but a soft exhale came from her slack mouth as she rotated to see a fair-haired man trudging through the snow towards them. "Mikael."

The dead air only made it easier for the man to hear his name, and at her acknowledgement, he sped up his pace. When he stumbled in a deep patch of snow and his attention was elsewhere, she shot an uncertain look over her shoulder. Loki's self-satisfied expression only made the knot in her stomach worse.

Turning back, she cast a tense smile to the man who had almost been her fiancé. Famine might not have been the sole reason for her leaving Finland. Having to turn down his proposal in front of so many people had been beyond embarrassing.

"I can't believe it's you, Kaisa." The last few feet between them disappeared as he enveloped her in a suffocating hug. "I never thought I'd see you again."

Jane struggled for air over the thick muscles of his shoulder. The large and burly Mikael was the complete opposite of Loki, a fact that was obvious enough on its own but even more so when she could compare how different it felt to be trapped in each of their arms.
Mikael liked to wear his strength on his sleeve for all to see, showing it off in feats of strength and power.

Loki liked to keep his concealed, even though she could feel his natural power brimming beneath the surface.

"How have you been? Where have you been?" His beard scratched at her cheek uncomfortably. "I didn't know you were planning to return. You disappeared in such a hurry." He pulled away, hands remaining heavy on her shoulders and face split wide in a beaming grin. "Not that it matters. You're more than welcome to stay in the spare room."

In the brief gap before he could continue came the sound of Loki clearing his throat. It was quiet but might as well have been a gunshot for how quickly Mikael's attention snapped to his. The smile froze, turned stiff. And as the two men stared each other down, Jane slipped out of Mikael's grasp and stepped back.

Though she intentionally stopped partway between them to appear neutral, Mikael looked back and forth from her to Loki, confused. "Who is this?"

That was an excellent question. "Oh… um…" And one she'd been completely unprepared to answer. "He's my…"

Besides being a Prince of Asgard and an immortal God of Mischief, what was Loki? More importantly, what was he to her? He was more than just some overarching figure in the perpetuity of her life. He'd saved her. Twice. There was a purpose to the first time. She still maintained that he'd given her the apple as part of some hidden agenda he had. But the second time…

I was safeguarding my investment.

She didn't know if by investment he meant the time he'd spent observing her through the years or some larger reason. Based on his expression when she'd questioned him on the beach, she suspected his response was only a cover-up and that he'd acted for no other reason than he wanted to, which was just as confusing.

Regardless, he'd chosen to save her. An act like that changed things, changed the dynamic between them. Time had helped them move past being awkward acquaintances, and deepening conversations had helped them move past being comrades.

So what were they now?

Who was Loki to her now?

"This is…" In the middle of her inarticulate floundering, snow crunched in the background, and she felt Loki's presence behind her even before his left arm brushed the back of her right. "My…"

"Husband."

Abruptly, her stammering cut off, teeth clicking together when her jaw snapped closed. She took back all the good things she'd ever thought or said about him in the past eight hundred years. It didn't matter that she'd challenged him to prove his title. Well, technically it did, she just never imagined she'd be a direct part of whatever trick he executed.

"Or soon to be." Loki took another step forward and slipped his arm easily across her shoulders, drawing her to his side. "We're to be married in just a few weeks."
Jane's mind lagged. Her ears functioned much quicker than her thoughts, filing away the words while her brain attempted to process what was happening. And when she glanced down to see a ring on her finger she was absolutely sure hadn't been there thirty seconds ago, she gaped at Loki. He merely smiled down at her.

"You… are…" Swaying, Mikael took a couple steps to steady himself. "Engaged?"

"She wanted to be discreet about the wedding, but her beauty has captivated me and I'm unable resist. What man could keep a secret such as her to himself?" Loki smoothly disregarded the way her mouth tightened into a thin line in displeasure and looked back to their guest. "Surely you would agree with me, good sir?"

Mikael, looking just as stunned as Jane felt, nodded silently.

"Initially, we decided to get married in London, but Kaisa was convinced I would want to wed in Finland if I only got the chance to see its beauty. I must say, I'm impressed. That chapel over there, does it overlook the forest? It would make a charming venue."

Loki had once told her that people also called him the God of Lies. It made sense. The skill with which he crafted words was unparalleled, not to mention he was a brilliant actor. If she wasn't so shocked, she would've been impressed with how effortlessly he shifted personas, taking on an easy air that brought to mind any man she'd ever met in London. But she wasn't shocked enough to not be upset at herself for even bringing up the subject of marriage earlier because that must have been where he'd adopted the idea.

Eventually, she realized Loki had stopped his rambling conversation and both he and Mikael were staring expectantly at her. "What?"

Loki's laugh held none of its usual darker edge. "She's a dreamer, this one. Always staring at the stars or with her head in the clouds. I find it to be one of her most endearing traits."

The arm around her shoulders fell until his hand rested on her lower back as he turned to face her. Again, her expression – this time it was more apprehension than displeasure because they were entirely too close – went unnoticed. Earlier, she'd rationalized the nearness by attributing it to their travelling. Now, there was no excuse, no reason for it.

Other than Loki's mischief, of course.

"I asked if you would be pleased to marry here."

If Loki's carefree disposition wasn't enough to throw her, hearing him say that combination of words while holding her in his arms was. But as much as she wanted to refute the question, Mikael was still watching them. If she wanted to avoid making a scene, she didn't have a choice. Loki had concocted this game and was now forcing her to play along.

So instead of frowning or pushing him away, she smiled back. "Very much so."

"Excellent."

Jane anticipated that would be the end of their ruse. At that point, she didn't even care what Mikael would think if they simply disappeared into thin air. Even if he told the rest of Rovaniemi, no one would believe him.

She stood there, patiently waiting for Loki to take them back to London.
But when he leaned forward to press his lips to hers, the world went still.

It was no more than a split-second, but the chaste kiss felt like an eternity. And yet, for something so long as eternity, there wasn't enough time for her to close her eyes. There wasn't enough time to even consider closing her eyes. There was only enough time for her to breathe in his exhale, warm and cool all at once, and feel the slight touch of his fingertips against her chin.

As quickly as they touched, they separated. However, she knew that moment – the feeling of his lips, soft against hers; the image of his pale eyelids, lowered and lined with dark lashes; the tingling taste of something that could only be magic on her tongue as it darted out to wet her lips when he pulled away – would be imprinted in her mind for the rest of her life.

In a daze, she stared at Loki's profile as he stepped away. She vaguely registered him asking Mikael if he could arrange housing for them during their stay, and she could barely muster a soft thank you when Mikael began to shuffle back into town. Only once they were alone did she speak.

"What was that?"

It was no small wonder how he managed to lie so well when he could craft such a carefully blank expression. "What was what?"

"That." She motioned towards the retreating Mikael. "This." She gestured between them. "Everything." She flung her hands wide in exasperation.

"That, Jane, was the proof you demanded." With a crooked smirk, he echoed her words from before. "Did it meet your expectations?"

She promptly decided that Loki was referring to his overall trick and not the kiss. If she didn't make that assumption, she wasn't sure she'd be able to answer.

Snow slipped over the tops of her boots and melted into her wool socks as she trudged over to him. "Yes." And because things hadn't gone at all like she'd planned, she growled it again. "Yes. You are, indeed, the God of Mischief. Now take me home before we have to go through with an actual wedding."

His hands were barely felt through the thick material of her coat, but she wished earmuffs would've been provided with her new outfit. That way she wouldn't have had to listen to him chuckle.

She peered up around furrowed brows. "You could've claimed to be my brother, you know."

And in the moment before he stepped through space back to London, her brows furrowed doubly at his continued chuckling. "But that wouldn't have been nearly as entertaining."

A month later found them in almost identical positions as the last time he'd visited: Jane sprawled across the bed reading a book and Loki sitting on the window seat. The only changes were that the book in her hands was no longer the *Prose Edda* due to it having magically disappeared upon their return from Finland – she couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but she figured Loki was to blame – and the window was no longer open due to the crisp air outside.

Oh, and there was the fact that Loki had kissed her thirty days ago.
It was the elephant in the room, the subject neither of them was willing to bring up. Her initial thoughts were to chalk it up to his act for Mikael, but while it had only solidified Loki’s claim that they were engaged, it hadn’t been necessary by any means.

In no way did Jane pretend to be a blushing virgin. Eight hundred years, several trysts, and the Caribbean as a whole had ruined her for any idealistic visions she might have had regarding the relationship between men and women. But that didn't mean she was unaffected by what happened. And just because they'd agreed – it was a mutual and silent agreement since they were *not talking about it* – to push the incident aside, that didn't mean she didn't think about it.

Because she did.

More than she cared to admit.

Hidden behind the book, she touched a finger to her lips. It had been unexpected. It had been unanticipated. It had been unforeseen. But she couldn't say it had been unpleasant. Not completely. Which made it that much more confusing and was why they were *not talking about it* and was why she *shouldn't be thinking about it* and was why she was changing the non-verbal subject *right now*.

"Will you ever take me somewhere again?"

"Possibly."

"Would you ever take me to another realm?"

"No."

The book in her hands tilted so she could see him over the top. He hadn't even hesitated, didn't even pause to ponder the decision. It wasn't even an option. Quick answer. Quick rejection.

"Why not?"

Loki's eyes met hers across the room. "If you think the effects of travel within this realm to be unsettling, those that accompany inter-realm travel would be significantly worse. Trust me when I say you wouldn't enjoy it."

The effects of the way Loki travelled weren't the easiest to withstand – she'd collapsed against him when they went to Finland and passed out against him when they’d returned to London – but he'd said they would lessen the more often she experienced them. Jane was completely willing to undergo the pain and embarrassment if it meant she could one day go to another realm. However, it appeared she would be receiving no passage to Asgard or Vanaheim or even Muspelheim in the future.

That only left one option.

"Then I'll just figure it out for myself."

As expected, Loki's partial attention shifted to his full attention. "That's not feasible."

"It's called science." She held up the book in her hands as an example. "I know you think magic is the only way to traverse the realms—"

"It *is* the only way. Magic cannot be explained by your numbers and figures."

"—but I think, given enough time, I could discover another way."

Loki spun on the window seat to face her, feet lowering to the floor. "It took the greatest masters of
magic the realms have ever known to create the Bi-Frost. Even I would be unable to create something similar to it. And yet, you think yourself capable of doing the same thing with science."

Hands resting on his knees, he leaned forward. "How?"

According to her book, natural selection was described as the process by which traits become more or less common based on their effect on subsequent generations. Survival of the fittest. Jane couldn't help but wonder about the phrase. Had a sense of superiority benefited Loki's ancestors so much that they were the reason for his arrogance or was it all him, plain and simple?

"I've no idea. But I'll eventually figure it out." She'd been tossing around the idea of attending a university anyway. Rumor had it that one in Switzerland had recently begun to admit women, and having a goal in mind would help give her some direction. "I might as well put some use to the endless amounts of time I possess."

"So now you have three goals: to learn why I chose to grant you with immortality, to discover my supposed association with the sons of Muspel, and to concoct some way to travel between realms."

It sounded even better stated so clearly. She'd spent years trying to figure out why Loki gave her the apple, but it was impossible to find the intention when he was the only one that held the answers. For the same reason, she couldn't determine what had happened between him and the fire giants. Not when he was unwilling to explain anything.

But inter-realm travel… that was something that only depended on her.

That was something she could do.

Invigorated by her newfound objective, she tossed the book aside, relocated to the desk, and began to scribble down her thoughts. Half the page was already full of observations and ideas when Loki slipped into the chair opposite her.

"You are a strange person, Jane Foster."

She'd been in the middle of writing everything she could remember of the few times he'd taken her through the seams of space and had every intention of ignoring him. But then she paused. And her mouth fell open. And she looked at him.

Obviously, it was not the reaction he'd anticipated. "What?" His forehead crinkled, and his head turned to the side even though his eyes remained on hers.

"Nothing…" Jane smiled and returned to her work, her answer coming almost conversationally. "That's just the first time you've referred to me as a person instead of only a human."

Chapter End Notes

Quick fire history facts for this chapter – the University of Zurich in Switzerland allowed women to attend lectures beginning in 1847, and it was the first university in Europe to allow women to attend for a degree starting in 1865. The book Jane’s reading in the last section is meant to be the 1869 publication of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, which was also the first version to include the term ‘survival of the fittest’. And speaking of terms, ‘psychology’ was just a branch of philosophy until roughly 1879 and ‘reverse psychology’ wasn’t technically coined until 1920, so Jane could only think of
her efforts as ‘convincing someone, but backwards’.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

This is one of the chapters I’d envisioned since first sitting down to plan out this story so I’m excited to have reached this point. I’m pretty sure I was born in the wrong decade considering how fascinated I am with this time period. Also, there’s a decent amount of jazz-era slang in this chapter, so I put a few definitions at the end. Scroll ahead and read about them if you’re not sure what something means.

Chapter Nine

“This looks like absolution, which means first it must have looked like sin.”

1927: Chicago, United States

Music pounded, the vibrations moving through the floor and the windows and the very air in the room creating a noise all its own, and Jane soaked it in, letting its rhythm flow through her like a second heartbeat. The speakeasy was brimming with people. Most of them either crowded on the open floor, swinging and dancing to the brassy jazz blaring from the band on stage, pressed against the bar seeking more drinks, or slouched at tables gambling away their money. Those who weren’t had retreated to the club's darkened corners where their necking could be easier overlooked.

Out on the floor, Jane danced. She held tight to George as he pulled her in, twirled her back out, and spun them around, all between the quick steps of the Lindy Hop. It was one of the newest dances to come about and had taken Chicago by storm.

She half-laughed, half-squealed when George flipped her over his arm, but there was no pause. Feet automatically keeping time with the music, she followed his lead. And with each repeated swingout, she twisted and kicked before he brought her back with a tug on her hand. Coming back together, they skipped around the floor until he flipped her once more, this time across his shoulders, as the song came to a close.

The club broke out into applause. Breathing heavily through her smile, Jane leaned forward against George, one hand around his back, the other on his chest. They were both laughing, but when the band started to pick up the next song and he offered her his hand, she shook her head.

"Break…” She was still panting from the exertions of the fast-paced dance. "I need a break."

George led her through the dancing couples to the bar where she collapsed onto a stool. Immediately, she felt a weight against her back and turned to see a pale face accented with freckles and framed by vibrantly red hair.
"You two cut quite a picture out there. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were a hoofer in a past life. You danced circles around Doris and Harold."

Jane followed her nod to the couple still on the floor, and they watched as Harold stumbled and fell, pulling Doris down with him. "Admittedly, they've had a bit more to drink than I have."

"Well, there's only one way to fix that." Alice slapped her hand down on the bar and grabbed George's vest with the other. "Betty needs another drink, George. Hell, I need a drink, too. Order us all something, would you?"

Always obliging, George retrieved his hat from its perch on Alice's head, tipped it to the two of them, and moved behind Jane where he signaled to the bartender. In all honesty, none of them needed any more to drink. George was doing the best out of all of them. He was still steady on his feet and was only slurring a few of his words. On the other hand, Alice was already swaying on the bar stool while the world around Jane had picked up the habit of lagging every time she moved her head.

Still, the liquor was free and the music was booming and the edge had her feeling so good she didn't really care how bad she'd feel in the morning, so when George returned with three cocktails in hand – it really didn't matter what they were – she eagerly downed it.

The lemon juice and mint did nothing to mask the vodka. It burned as it slid down her throat, and almost straightaway after it settled in her belly, the world took on a slightly hazy view. But again, it didn't matter because the combined lag and blur made it entertaining to watch the patrons that now moved in slow motion.

Beside her, Alice slammed the glass onto the bar. "South Side… it never gets old." She reached up to smooth her hair but only proceeded to muss it with her clumsy motions. "How about we take one more round?"

It took a couple tries before Jane's hands managed to find Alice's hair and fix what the woman had messed up. "Maybe you should take it easy. You're moving an awful lot for someone sitting down."

"Look who's talking. You've been wavering ever since you sat down."

"I have not." While she spoke, she felt her shoulder press against George's abdomen. There was the possibility he'd moved to stand closer behind her, but it was more likely that she'd inadvertently swayed back onto him. In an effort to convince herself more than anyone else, she repeated a little more insistently. "I have not."

"Then you can handle another one. Come on… just one more, Betty." Alice's eyes cut above her head, the unspoken signal to George to fetch them another drink. "Show those bastards in the capital that Prohibition is dead."

Somewhere between one blink and the next, a drink appeared in front of her. Another South Side. Jane stared down at the pale green liquid, then over at Alice, then up at George. Two out of three wore cheerful grins, the third promised she'd wear a grin of her own after drinking it.

"Oh, what the hell." She took the glass from George and clinked it against his and Alice's in turn. "To the death of Prohibition."

They echoed her toast before Alice added her own. "They can't keep us down."

The liquor slid down a little easier the second time. Jane would've attributed it to the drink being weaker, but the way the room subsequently rolled said otherwise. The music no longer vibrated
through the speakeasy, it shook the very foundations, and after setting her glass down, she clutched the edge of the bar in an attempt to hold the building still.

But before she knew it, the rolling had passed and she was laughing at something Alice had said.

And Jane couldn't remember what it was that she'd said, only that it was so damn funny, and laughed all the more.

And they were leaning forwards, using each other's legs and shoulders as braces to keep from falling to the floor, and laughing until they gasped for breath and their sides hurt.

And when another glass appeared in front of them, they didn't even think twice before taking it because the bootlegged vodka tasted so smooth by that point.

And the jazz kept playing and the people kept dancing and the gamblers kept spending and the lights were low and the room was warm and the air was filled with the scent of sweat and tobacco and liquor and rebellion…

Jane vaguely noticed George's outstretched hand interrupt their laughing and was still trying to process his question when Alice slid her hand into his. It was a good thing the redhead was so petite because when she tumbled off the stool, George managed to catch her easily and set her on her feet.

"We'll be… right back." Alice giggled, wobbling a bit even though her arm was looped through George's, and indistinctly gestured behind her. "We're going to dance."

Jane watched them disappear into the crowd. How either of them would be able to dance when the room was spinning so much was beyond her. Still, it sounded like too much fun to pass up. Wearing the grin the drink had promised and acting entirely on impulse, Jane snagged the next gentleman that walked by and pulled him towards dance floor.

By the time they'd reached an open spot, the drink that had been in his hand had disappeared, which left both of them free to guide her in another swinging dance. The floor pitched beneath her feet, but she spun and jumped and quick-stepped as best she could. Even though the cocktails insisted she was dancing superbly, she no doubt looked a fool.

But in the end, she was too far gone to care.

It was during their third dance – or it might have been their fourth or fifth because, really, who was keeping count? – that her fingers slipped from his on a particularly strong swingout. They'd been hugging the edges of the dance floor where there was more room to swing and flip, which also meant there was plenty of room for her to stumble away from him.

She managed to keep her feet, but the alcohol had burned away any ability she might have had to stop her forward momentum.

Jane briefly registered the poker table surrounded by men holding cigars, brandy glasses, and cards that she was headed for. And she was so sure she was going to crash into their table that she let out a surprised oomph when she connected with a firm chest instead.

The men continued their game, not even recognizing they'd narrowly escaped a collision. But while a few of the men were throwing down their cards in disgust as another raked in his winnings, Jane was meeting familiar grey-green eyes.

"Loki?"
She wasn't sure, at first, if it was really him or only an alcohol-induced illusion. However, the solid torso she was pressed up against, the spike of cedar that cut through the smoke, and the smirk that eased across his face were things her mind couldn't have supplied in such detail after as many drinks as she'd consumed so it had to be him.

"Are you alright?"

It took her a moment to realize that it wasn't the God of Mischief who'd spoke but the man she'd been dancing with, that having been the first time she'd heard his voice. Trapped within the circle of Loki's arms, she rotated just enough to see her prior partner come up behind them.

"I'm so sorry, baby. It all happened so fast. We were getting it good, but then I felt you slip and you were gone." He rubbed at his forearm, looking appropriately contrite. In the background, the band ended one song and began striking up the first notes of the next. "Would you..." His apologetic expression was replaced with a nervous hesitance. "Do you want to keep going?"

Jane couldn't find it in herself to be upset. After all, it was only an accident. But she'd stood still long enough for the liquor to catch up to her, which left her second-guessing the wisdom in any more dancing. Especially with the way the room was contracting and expanding, the floor rising and falling.

The arms around her dropped as she spun to completely face the nameless man, but she felt the firm expanse of Loki's chest against her back when she wavered, his hands instantly settling at her hips to steady her again.

"I think I'm fine, actually." If possible the man's face fell even more, and Jane rushed to reassure him. "No, don't worry. Everything's copacetic. It's just... you know, the drinks and the heat are getting to me."

"You're sure?" He looked a little better at her insistent nod, but she didn't miss the way his eyes darted above her head. They narrowed a bit and lowered to the hands resting on her hips, then returned to what could only be Loki's eyes. "You going to be alright with this guy?"

The fingers curled around her hipbones twitched almost imperceptibly.

"Yes." And when the tension in the air didn't abate, she added. "I'll be fine."

The three of them remained there for a moment, frozen in an impasse, but eventually her dance partner gave up and, after a nod farewell, retreated into the crowd. Jane, however, remained where she was.

With every drumbeat and trumpet note, the room pulsed and the lights flashed. Watching the people circling and swinging on the dance floor was making her dizzy, but the floor moving like water beneath her feet wasn't much better so she turned her attention to a poker table instead. Though, that ended up being worse when the dealer made the cards dance in an extravagant shuffle. It was warm breath ghosting over her ear that finally helped her focus.

"You've had too much to drink."

The world dipped and spun as she turned but settled down again once she was staring up at Loki. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time."

When she felt his chuckled exhale on her face, the fog in her mind lifted enough for her to realize just how close they were still standing. Her rotation had made him drop his hands once more, and without them, she took an experimental step backwards. The shifting floor tried to topple her, but she
fought for balance, throwing a hand out to keep Loki away when she noticed his arm move out of the corner of her eye.

He chuckled again at her action. Once she felt stable, she met his eyes only to find him scanning her form. "This is..." A smirk crawled across his face. "Different. No more concealing every trace of skin, I see."

Jane glanced down at the knee-length, sleeveless dress she wore. It shimmered with glittering, silver beads and was accentuated by the matching silver headband that secured her bobbed hair. There were few things she'd splurged on throughout the years, but this dress was one of them. Likewise, there were few cultural movements in which she'd taken part, but the transition from demure, quiet woman to rebellious, outspoken flapper was one she'd embraced.

"I visit one year to see you in boringly modest clothing with your hair secured. The next, you're..." He trailed off, hand motioning up and down her body.

Not sure how to take his tone, Jane fell back on defensiveness and crossed her arms. "No one's forcing you to look. If it's so unappealing, just come back in a few years. It's likely things will have changed by then."

"I'm sure they will. Of all the realms, Midgard is the most susceptible to change."

The band prevented anyone from eavesdropping on their strange conversation. Even still, Loki took a step towards her, and Jane was forced to watch the space she'd earned be displaced, traded out in exchange for his body in what was becoming a strange, habitual type of dance between them. They weren't as close as they'd been before but were still close enough for him to draw close and speak softly into her ear, voice low.

"And I never said your new appearance was unappealing."

Despite the tepid air, a shiver skittered down her spine. Jane leaned back just enough to meet Loki's eyes, which wasn't difficult considering he was still at her level. For a long moment, they remained motionless, staring at each other as people danced and talked and drank around them. But the longer they stood there, the more she realized the glint in his eyes couldn't be entirely attributed to the flickering lights.

He was trying to fluster her with his comments.

That made it a game.

However, she was a little too far gone to engage in any kind of game so she did what seemed like the next best thing: dissolve into laughter. Clearly, her reaction was not what he'd expected. Loki straightened and stared down at her, the glint in his eyes fading but not quite disappearing altogether.

Pausing only to breathe, Jane grasped her sides. It really wasn't that funny – she knew it wasn't that funny – but that just made it harder not to laugh. Standing in the middle of a club with a modern day suit-wearing Loki while vodka raged through her system should've felt surreal. Instead, it only felt irrationally amusing.

When she moved to wipe away a stray tear, she swayed. She took one wavering step, then another, but before she could fall into something or someone for the second time in what couldn't have been more than five minutes, Loki's fingers found her wrist. With a slight tug, he turned her backwards sway into a forward one, and her hand automatically found his chest to steady herself.

"Easy, Jane." The glint was back in his eyes, but she continued to chuckle in favor of letting the
awkwardness she knew she should feel at their contact come up.

But, then, that awkwardness wasn't as constant a companion as it had been in the past. Even at times like this – his hand on her hip, hers on his chest – things didn't necessarily feel out of place. It would've been easy to blame it on the alcohol, but Jane knew it for what it was. Because even though their relationship had evolved naturally throughout the centuries, something drastic had shifted between them in England.

She was trying not to think about a snowy afternoon in Finland – and failing spectacularly, as was the norm – when approaching steps and a familiar voice caught her attention.

"There you are, Betty! I've been… looking for you… every… where…" Alice's quick steps slowed in time with her words as she glanced from Jane to Loki. Then, she stopped completely, scanning Loki from head to toe, her expression one of obvious appreciation. "Who's this?" When she finished her perusal, she smiled.

"This is Robert. He's an old friend from university." Loki's hand remained around her wrist as she stepped back, only letting go once she was stable. She absentmindedly rubbed at the spot he'd held and looked to Alice. "What did you need?"

"I was going to let you know George went to get us more drinks, but you appear to be a little… preoccupied."

The woman's tone did little to hide what she evidently suspected, and Jane blushed in response.

"Oh… um… no, this is nothing." The room wheeled a bit when she glanced at Loki. "We're just friends."

"Just friends?" That predatory smile was back again, this time with a renewed focus.

Meanwhile, Jane was so busy desperately hoping Loki wouldn't make contradicting her and potentially ruining her current life one of his tricks that the tenuous hold she had on her balance nearly crumbled when he said the last thing she would've expected.

"We were also just leaving."

Alice turned to Jane. "You were?"

Jane turned to Loki. "We were?"

It was both better and worse. Leaving the speakeasy would prevent any more questions they were unprepared to answer, but at the same time, Jane would be pelted with a barrage of them the next time she saw Alice. She could handle the inquiries by herself, though. It was Loki's unpredictability that made her nervous.

"What's the rush?" As Alice sashayed up to Loki, Jane stepped farther away. "We could dance or get a drink. I've also been told I have a good poker face. Care to have a go?"

Brazen when sober, Alice was positively shameless when drunk. And she was very drunk. Most men were too taken by her striking hair and fair skin and dazzling smile to even consider anything more than accompanying her to a darkened corner or a secluded room. But judging by the way Loki met Jane's eyes over the top of Alice's head, he was not most men.

"I can see why you were keeping this one all to yourself, Betty." When Alice sidled closer still and ran a finger up Loki's arm, Jane was forced to cover her mouth as she dissolved into another bout of laughter at his expression. "He's quite the catch."
"I'm not keeping him to myself." If it weren't for the fact that Loki could cause significant amounts of trouble in her life and potentially harm her friend, she'd be tempted to leave him to Alice. But the muscle jumping in his jaw as his teeth clenched convinced her to intervene. "We really should be going, though."

"But it's not even midnight." Alice's seductive pout was wasted on a completely unresponsive Loki.

Jane stepped between the two of them, gaining Loki some space before he decided not to suffer Alice's affectation anymore and do something more drastic. "I know, but I'm just going to call it a night. You and George should keep at it." The man waiting patiently at the bar waved when they both looked his way. "Robert can escort me home."

"You're sure you don't want to stay?"

At Jane's persistent nod, Alice visibly deflated. As the woman's closest friend, Jane liked to think it was because Alice wanted to spend time with her, but the way she mournfully scanned the God of Mischief once more made her think it had more to do with Loki leaving than Jane.

Then again, she couldn't really fault her. Immortal or not, Jane was still human, and she couldn't deny that, done up in an immaculate suit that was tailored to perfection, Loki cut a handsome figure.

Resigning herself to another night spent with George – when no other options arose, they had the tendency to fall back on each other as lovers – Alice swooped in for a farewell hug. "Be good." Then closer to her ear, softer, with a snarky grin that could literally be heard. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Jane smiled into the woman's hair knowing that was a short list. "I won't."

They separated, and as Alice turned to weave her way towards the bar, Loki's hand settled on Jane's lower back. He steered her through the mass of people to the exit, steadying her whenever she bumped into someone. Not until they emerged into cleaner air and more space did his hand drop.

Rotating in a shaky circle, Jane breathed deep and surveyed their surroundings. It was a familiar neighborhood made unfamiliar by the way the world seemed to shift. She blinked hard to try and make the buildings and ground hold still, but that only made it worse. Several groups of people that had settled for dancing to the jazz spilling from the open doors and drinking in the streets didn't help. When a couple ran past, their images blurred behind them.

"I live..." She glanced up and down the street. "I live this way."

Loki came up beside her as she turned to the right. The walk started well, but they hadn't gone more than ten steps when the toe of her shoe caught in a crack on the sidewalk and she stumbled. Giggling drunkenly at her clumsiness, she took hold of Loki's proffered arm.

"Couldn't you just use your magic to take me home?"

Beneath the cigar smoke still clinging to his suit, she could smell the underlying scent of frost as he pulled her closer. "I take it your studies have yet to reveal a way through the seams of space."

"You know I haven't figured out anything yet."

Several years and two degrees had only given her more questions than answers when it came to finding her own method of travel. That hadn't stopped her from searching, though. She just needed to bide her time, wait for science to advance.
She looped her arm through his, hand resting on his forearm, and returned to the more important issue. "So could you?"

"And have you faint on me again?"

"That was only one time…" Any other time, she would have cringed at her borderline whining tone, but seeing how Loki was ignoring her pleading expression, it didn't matter. "And this isn't nearly so far as Finland."

"But you are considerably more intoxicated." When she stumbled again, this time on nothing but slick concrete, he issued a long-suffering sigh. "Seeing how you can't handle the drinks served at that establishment, I hope this isn't something you partake in regularly."

She paused to think, not realizing she'd also stopped walking until Loki prompted her forward. "We don't go too often, just every three or four days."

"That would be considered often, Jane." It wasn't the easiest thing to walk and give him a stern look, but she managed. However, it was clear her efforts were a failure when he chuckled. "At least tell me you haven't crawled down these streets to your home before."

"Excuse me, I've never been so ossified I've had to crawl."

Stagger? Yes. Lean heavily on buildings and railings? Yes. Depend on someone else to prevent her from falling? Yes. Crawling on her hands and knees because one of the previous options wasn't available? Never.

"Most of the time George calls us a cab."

"Public displays of drunkenness…" He nodded towards a man passed out on the opposite sidewalk. "A complete disregard for shame…" He nodded towards a couple not quite hidden in the alleyway as they passed. "Midgard is becoming more like Asgard every time I visit." The hand not attached to the arm supporting most of her weight reached out to touch a line of chipped bricks. "Without the splendor, of course."

"So if this is how it is in Asgard, how many times have you passed out from drinking too much?"

From the corner of her eye, she saw his chin lift minutely and smiled to herself. "I never allow myself to get to that point." Men and their pride.

"Then I suppose you've never made a fool out of yourself, either?"

"Not since my youth."

"Hm." She tried to envision what embarrassing things a younger, inebriated Loki would've done. The image of a teenage God of Mischief fleeing from another Asgardian after playing a drunken trick ran through her mind, but the probability of him telling her any concrete details was slim so she settled for peeking up at him. "And what about any shameful public displays?"

He met her salacious grin with one of his own. "I prefer privacy."

After her laugh faded, they fell into silence. Loki dutifully led her through the darkened Chicago streets, and Jane was pleased to find the walk did wonderful things for clearing her head. It did so well that, by the time they reached her apartment building, the alcohol was only a pleasant buzz in the back of her mind.
"Well, this is it." She peered up at the building, already dreading the six flights of stairs to her room because even though her head was clearer, her legs were still shaky. "Thank you for… whoa, what are you doing?"

With one smooth motion, Jane found herself facing Loki with his arms around her. Her dulled senses struggled to catch up to what was happening, but once she recovered enough to look up, her unsure gaze met Loki's quasi-exasperated one.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "You said you didn't want to—"

But then the air was stripped away, taking her words with it. And when everything returned, she opened her eyes to see Loki's chest and, behind him, her apartment door. Apart from being slightly nauseous, she felt fine. Either she was growing accustomed to the sensations of his method of travel or she was still too drunk to tell.

"I thought you were worried about me passing out."

"Distance, Jane." As if she should have already realized it. "Also, you are starting to sober."

"Thank you." She took a moment to eye Loki's clothing – in the split-second of travel between the first floor and the sixth, he'd returned to his standard Asgardian garb – before moving out of his arms and around him. With her back to him, she swallowed and added the afterthought over her shoulder. "Again."

It took her a couple tries to unlock the door, but on the third, it finally swung open. Tucking the spare key back into the hiding spot behind the wood frame, she reached into the darkness to flip on the entryway light. When she turned and saw Loki still standing there, she hesitated.

"Do you… want to come in?"

Jane had to bite her tongue to keep from snickering after the question rolled out. Irony was what made it so amusing because Loki never asked to appear or come in, he just did. He'd always been that way. Confidence was a natural part of him.

So when he dipped his head in a shallow nod and accepted her invitation without any characteristic show of assuredness, the only thing she could do was open wide the door, stand aside as he moved past her, and trail him through the small foyer and into the living area. Where he stopped in the triangular space between the couch, the side table, and an armchair, though, she continued on to her bedroom.

"I'm just going to change." A shower would've been preferable, but it would be enough to get out of the dress clinging to the sweat that dripped down her back.

Snagging her chemise and dressing gown from their spot on the bedpost, she crossed to the bathroom and closed the door. As expected, a change of clothes and a splash of cool water on her face did wonders, and she emerged feeling refreshed. She glanced over to where Loki stood with his back to her, running a finger down the line of tomes on her bookshelf, before depositing the dress in a basket of dirty clothes needing to be washed, tossing the shoes into a corner, and taking a seat at her dressing table.

The silver headband came off, as did the dangling earrings. Opening a small vial, she upended it and dabbed the drop of rose-scented perfume left on her finger on both wrists and either side of her neck. She was in the middle of drawing a comb through her hair when he ended the silence.

"Have there been any more signs?"
She found his reflection in the mirror, but not his eyes. They remained trained on a book held open in his hands. "Of the fire giants?" Taking the slight tilt of his head as confirmation, the comb resumed its repeated motion. "Not as many. The last time I saw a concrete sign of them was in Brazil. That was... nineteen years ago, now?" She winced when the teeth caught in a tangle of hair. "I saw something that might have been a handprint in South Africa, but it was too indistinct to say for sure it was them."

Her explanation was met with only the sound of a page turning. As she watched it flip, she recognized one of the illustrations as part of an article on Einstein's general theory of relativity that she'd picked up as part of her studies. Setting the comb down, she twisted on the seat to stare at Loki instead of his reflection.

"You did an excellent job of warning them off, apparently."

"I suppose." He flipped another page, this time to an article that criticized how Einstein's findings were derived purely by mathematical reasoning and rational analysis. "Not well enough, though, if they're still coming to Midgard."

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Jane would wake up drenched in sweat from a nightmare that relived those last few agonizing moments during the fire giant's attack. Those were the times she couldn't stop thinking about how it felt to die or analyzing details to find the connection between Muspelheim and Loki. For the most part, though, the relative peace in the decades since Russia made it easier to not dwell on what happened there. It was easier to lose herself in her studies on finding ways to traverse the realms instead.

However, there was one glaring detail that had been on her mind since she'd first thought of it.

"Whatever happened to your armor?"

Loki looked up from the last article in the set, one that praised Einstein after a successful prediction of how much light would be bent by the sun's gravity during the solar eclipse eight years ago. "What?"

"Your armor, the pieces you wore the first time we met in Norway... that was the only time I've ever seen you wear it. I would've expected you to don it during the battle in Russia, but you didn't."
Rearranging her knee-length robe, Jane crossed her legs. "I was just wondering if you even still had it."

"I do."

"Then why don't you ever wear it?"

Breaking their stare, he closed the book and replaced it on the shelf. "It isn't necessary when dealing with mortals and their weapons."

"It didn't seem to be necessary in dealing with that fire giant, either." She leaned forward, resting an elbow on her knee and propping her chin in her hand. The intricate pattern of the Oriental rug called to the vodka still coursing through her and made her dizzy, so she stared at the hardwood floor instead.

"No, it wasn't. He was weak, as are most of the sons of Muspel." The memory of footsteps that rattled the ground beneath her feet and claws that tore holes into buildings flashed through her mind. There were many words she would use to describe a fire giant, but weak was not one of them. "I am more skilled than that."
"So you don't need to wear your armor to defeat a fire giant that leveled part of Moscow, yet you wore it the day we met." Thoughtful and keen even through the haze of alcohol, her eyes flicked to him. "I wonder why that was. Met your match?"

He scoffed, the laugh coming out mocking. "In a mortal human?"

"No, in whatever foe you faced before you arrived in my village."

Initially, Jane thought the rigid lines of his body seemed to support her supposition, but the smirk on his face when he turned suggested otherwise. "You're so sure I was in battle before that?"

"I've a feeling." Even if she didn't feel quite as strongly in her belief as she did earlier.

He moved from one end of the bookshelf to the other, crooked smile a little darker, a little harsher. "What if my purpose was to intimidate whoever might have been there? As I've told you before, I'm not above performing feats to earn worship."

Jane's attention lowered to the golden line across his chest—

"But you're already under the assumption that I gave you the apple for a reason. Perhaps I was planning to use whatever means necessary to ensure you ate it."

—then they lowered further to his boots, crossed at the ankles as he leaned against the wall—

"Or do I just want you to believe that? Causing mischief is my specialty, after all."

—then they closed completely, welcoming the obscurity that came with the darkness.

"Well, Jane, which is it? I imagine it to be difficult to decide when there are so many possibilities."

Nine hundred years and she still didn't know a damn thing. Where did the game stop and reality start? Where did the lies end and the truth begin? Was she nothing more than a distracting pastime or a pawn in some larger game he was playing, blind to the other pieces that moved around her? And as usual, a conversation held with Loki left her with a headache.

Standing up, she opened the nearest cabinet and pulled out a decanter and glass. "If I get sick tonight, I'm blaming you." The clear liquid swirled in the crystal. "You can drive any person to become an alcoholic."

"I take it we're finished talking about this for the next decade?"

"Yes." She downed the shot, gasping as the hard liquor burned a path to her stomach.

The decanter tipped again, and she felt his regard heavy on her back as she fingered the shot glass. "You think it wise to keep drinking when you're already—"

"Yes." Truthfully, she knew she would regret her actions the next morning. The amount of vodka she'd consumed at the speakeasy would've been enough to make her curse the sunrise. Adding moonshine to it was the last thing she should be doing. But instead of pushing away the glass, Jane picked it up, turned, and raised it to Loki in a toast. "To borrow from Fitzgerald, here's to alcohol, the rose-colored glasses of life."

Because if she couldn't have answers, the least she could be was blissfully and drunkenly ignorant.

The second shot of moonshine burned just as badly as the first, but she welcomed the effects that were already filtering through her body and numbing her nerves. After replacing the decanter, she
turned to lean against the wall in a mirror image of Loki on the opposite side of the room.

"I really was curious about your armor, though. It may have been… different, but it was impressive. If intimidation was what you were striving for, you succeeded." She smiled faintly. "I almost miss it."

Thrown into shadow by the dim bulbs and the bookcase, it was difficult to make out Loki’s expression. However, she had no trouble seeing him gesture with one hand before returning it to its position crossed over his chest.

A shimmering combination of gold and green – the signature sign of his magic – started at the hand that had moved before slowly enveloping him. At its peak, the unnatural glow illuminated the room more brightly than any light bulb ever could, and when it faded, Jane was left looking at golden vambraces, spaulders covering his upper arms and shoulders, a flowing green cloak, and numerous smaller additions that made up Loki’s armor.

Pushing away from the wall, she took a few slow steps forward before stopping in the middle of the room. She absentmindedly nibbled at her lower lip as she studied him, eyes meandering from the golden clasps that secured his cloak to the reinforced overlays covering his boots. Nine centuries might as well have been none because every feature was exactly as she remembered. Every feature except…

"No helmet?"

The corners of his mouth quirked, and his eyes flicked pointedly to a spot behind her before returning to hers. With a raised eyebrow, she turned to see the helmet resting innocently on the sideboard to her left.

The burnished gold gleamed even in the dim lighting. Making her way across the room, she watched as the light caught in the detailed lines of it, refracted off the arching horns, was swallowed by the shadows within. She stopped in front of it and spared a single questioning glance back to Loki before reaching out.

A single finger traced the engravings down the side, crossed to the dipping point of the brow, skimmed over the horns' graceful curve. The extravagant detail of Loki’s armor was remarkable, but this… this was what she meant when she'd said his armor was intimidating. Because it was intimidation incarnate.

She could still remember how it felt to see him the first time, standing in profile with the wind stirring his cloak and the flames that consumed her home reflecting off his helmet. It had been an easy thing, drawing the comparison to Christianity's Satan.

The sharp point of a horn pricked her finger. Jane rubbed the spot with her thumb, wiping away the small drop of blood that welled up, and stared at the red that stained her skin in a daze. Then, with a confidence borne by the alcohol in her system, she picked up the helmet. She was taken aback by its weight, or rather, the lack thereof.

It lifted easily.

Too easily.

Like it was only an inexpensive plastic mold, a replica, a toy, and not an otherworldly object that could withstand battles with giants able to crush buildings and smell fear and wield fire.

Grasping the sides, she twisted the helmet, observing it from all angles, and when she finally lowered
it and turned around to lean back against the sideboard, Loki hadn't even moved. His eyes, however, watched her carefully, pinpricks of intrigue in the darkened corner.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Her thumb traced a repeated path around the base of one horn as she waited for him to answer.

"It's better I not say."

Her thumb stilled. "Why?"

Loki's lips tightened into a thin line, head canting to the side. "Because it's better you not know."

Evasion shouldn't seem like an improvement, but it was. That meant he wasn't outright lying to her. In the end, progress was progress.

Fingering the helmet, she pushed off from the sideboard, fought for control when the alcohol made the room tilt dangerously, and spun around to the mirror hanging on the wall. "Well, I have a theory if you're not willing to share."

"Oh, and what do you think?"

Jane studied the centuries-old woman reflected back at her, the helmet in her mirrored self's hands, the scar on her jaw that was the only physical sign of Loki having saved her life. Then she smoothly slipped Loki's helmet over her head.

The feeling was instantaneous. Power, authority, the unchallenged sense of complete control… it made identifying why he favored the design simple. And it was addicting. Bolstered by its effects, by the unadulterated rush it gave her, Jane turned away from the mirror to Loki.

"I think you want to kiss me."

Her voice sounded strange, dampened by the overlays covering her ears, but she didn't need to hear properly. She only needed her vision. To see the way Loki snapped to attention, to see the tension straighten his spine and force him from the wall, to see the light cast new shadows across the wrinkles knitting his brow when he emerged into it.

He faced her, stance wide, hands clasped behind his back, chin dipping just a bit. "You think I want to kiss you."

There was no inflection, which left it a disbelieving statement instead of an inquiry. But even with the distance between them, she could see something more on his face than haughty skepticism. Whatever the something more was, though, she couldn't say.

It might have been the way he was completely attuned to her movements, tracking her progress carefully as she crossed the room. It might have been the unnaturally deep breath he took when she stopped directly before him. It might have been the way his throat worked in a hard swallow as his eyes momentarily lifted, following the curve of the horns above her head.

But instead of dwelling on what the something more might have been, she allowed the weight of the helmet to force her head into a regal tilt, peered from beneath the plunging point, and met the intensity of his eyes with a smug expression.

"I think you want to kiss me…" The corner of her mouth lifted in a smirk. "Again."

It was the two shots of moonshine talking.
That was all.

But that wasn’t all because the liquor still buzzing through her veins was making her courageous enough to bring up things they’d wordlessly agreed not to talk about, bold enough to reduce the space between them to less than a foot, audacious enough to meet his eyes with a daringly arched eyebrow.

Moonshine always had done atrocious things to her decision-making abilities.

"An interesting concept, but I have a different proposal." His eyes roamed her face, flitting up to the horns curving above her head. "Perhaps a better question would be whether or not you want me to kiss you…” He imitated her smirk. "Again."

Her grin froze, faltered, and faded under the pure confidence laced throughout Loki’s.

And all of a sudden, Jane realized she was in over her head.

She’d started something she was too intoxicated to finish. No… she’d started something she could never have finished, sober or drunk. What the hell had she been thinking saying that? What the hell did she think would happen? She’d never been able to gain the upper hand in a conversation with Loki so why did she think it was a good idea to attempt it with vodka and moonshine coursing through her veins?

But said vodka and moonshine refused to give up and provided her with words that contradicted any rational thought that remained.

"And if I do?"

Loki regarded her as she craned her neck to peer up at him. In the silence following her question, they could hear the rest of Chicago – sirens in the distance, a pair of cats yowling in the streets, the couple that lived beneath her arguing – but Jane remained focused on the god, the being, the man before her. Because even though he was a God of Mischief…

He was still just a man.

His head tilted in thought as he weighed the situation. His jaw tensed with something that might have been resolve. His weight shifted from one foot to the other, pulling him closer until she could feel the hard edges of his armor through the softness of her robe.

He was still just a man.

And when his eyes lowered from her cheekbones to her nose to her mouth, her breath caught in her throat and her tongue darted out to wet her lips of its own accord.

He was still just a man.

And she was just a woman.

Both immortal, both ageless, both facing the unending lengths of eternity, and yet both of them were nothing more than a man and a woman.

Without warning, Jane felt a soft touch against the backs of her hands. The air rushed from her lungs in a heavy exhale, but she was too focused on the fiery path of his fingers over her wrists to remember to inhale again. Breathlessly, she watched him as he watched the movement of his hands. They paused at the sleeve of her robe, playing with the material and brushing against her forearm for
a moment before continuing their path around her elbows, up the backs of her arms, and over her shoulders.

Goosebumps broke out when his hands traced the delicate curve of her neck, but he didn’t remain there long. Instead, he continued upwards to the helmet, and she heard the echo of his touch as his fingers brushed against the smooth metal.

His forearms framed her face, attention on the helmet she wore, but beneath his calm façade, she could see that something more again, smoldering in the depths of his eyes. Before she could try to analyze anything, though, the tendons in his wrists stood out. Jane felt him grip the horns, felt the control through the helmet as he forced her head back just a bit farther. There was the slightest trace of fear, of hesitance, of what the hell were they doing…

Then, there was nothing but his proximity as he leaned down to her.

His slight exhale across her cheek.

His lips on hers.

It wasn’t so bad. It was actually quite nice. And once she stopped thinking so much about what they were doing and just let her eyes drift close, she could enjoy the way his lips moved skillfully against hers in a slow, leisurely kiss.

Later, Jane wouldn’t be able to remember the exact moment her hands drifted up to curl around the edges of Loki’s surcoat. She would only be able to remember the soft sound he made in the back of his throat and the way his hands lowered to cup her head and, when he momentarily pulled away, the greedy breath she sucked in before he returned to claim her mouth in an even deeper kiss.

She gave as good as she got, returning the kiss with a fervor she didn’t know she possessed. One hand abandoned his coat to curl around his neck. She dug her fingers into the firm muscle, heard her nails scratch against the hair at his nape, felt his skin slide beneath her fingertips as his mouth continued to work against hers. At the same time, one of his hands settled in the curve of her waist.

And she felt like she was burning.

It was the vodka, it was the moonshine, it was the overbearing heat in the room. It was the out-of-control beating of her heart. It was the way his fingers slid beneath the helmet to press against the back of her head, and the keening noise she emitted when he finally pulled away.

Jane didn’t want to open her eyes because to do so would mean she’d see Loki. She’d see him standing before her, too close for their proximity to be written off as casual, both of them having crossed an invisible line between friends and… something else.

But she did open her eyes.

And when the world tumbled back into focus, she stared into a whirling sea of grey-green that appeared just as shaken as she felt.

Loki had been the one to end the kiss, but Jane was the first to break apart. The hand at the nape of his neck lowered, the one clutching tightly to his surcoat following soon after, and when she stepped back, both of his hands fell away. She didn’t look away, though. From beneath the helmet, she continued to stare at him, chest heaving and heart racing, and could literally see him pull the shattered pieces of his control back together and knit them into an unreadable expression.

"I…” Jane swallowed. Hard. The words were too thick. They stuck in her throat. Nevertheless, she
tried again. "I'm…"

"You're what? Sorry?"

Her mouth snapped closed, thoughts a mess. Was she sorry? She'd instigated what happened, but she'd only meant it to be fun, a little mischievous act of her own. Never in her life had she imaged he'd actually kiss her. No, it definitely hadn't been part of her plan, but still… she hadn't exactly pushed him away.

So, was she sorry?

"I'm not." Loki busied himself, looking down as he needlessly adjusted the vambraces on his forearms. Then, after a brief glance to the helmet she still wore, both it and his armor disappeared with a flick of his fingers. A part of her was mildly put-off by the callous manner he'd adopted – was he not as affected by what happened as she was? – but when his attention returned to her, his face softened almost imperceptibly. "See you soon, Jane."

And in the timeless second before he disappeared, she thought she saw it again, a glimpse through the cracks of his being to the warring turmoil within where that something more resided.

Alone in the room, Jane staggered the few steps until her back connected with the wall and slowly slid down it until she sat on the floor. The room tilted on its axis, swirling with the aftereffects of the liquor, but the only thing she could think about as she let her head thump against the wall was… The evening… The conversation… The kiss… And how a small part of her, almost buried beneath the convoluted layers of denial, enjoyed it.

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – the roaring twenties were filled with change, especially for women. Clothing changed, hairstyles changed, makeup changed, and women became significantly bolder and more outgoing. Along with that was the Prohibition movement, which made selling, producing, and transporting alcohol illegal. The law did decrease alcohol consumption, but it also led to underground speakeasies and an increase in gang-related activity where mobsters like Al Capone dealt in bootlegged alcohol. Fitzgerald’s classic novel The Great Gatsby is an excellent portrayal of the lifestyle led during the time period, and the movie Lawless shows just how big an issue bootlegging alcohol was during Prohibition.

Roaring twenties jazz slang dictionary:
Speakeasy – a place that sold illegal alcohol
Necking/Petting – heavy kissing
Hoofer – dancer
The edge – a buzz; the feeling of being intoxicated
South Side – a gin and vodka drink popular in the Prohibition Era
Copacetic – agreeable; wonderful
Ossified – drunk

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
1943: Italy

Chapter Notes

This is another chapter that I’ve had in mind since the beginning and have been really excited to get to… for more than just one reason. Hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Ten

“Because death is just so full and man so small – well, I’m scared of what’s behind and what’s before.”

1943: Italy

Blood pulsed from between Jane's fingers, warm and wet and so very, very red. She clamped them even tighter together over the wound but couldn't stop the life from seeping out with each desperate heartbeat.

"Tourniquet! Someone get me a tourniquet!"

People were screaming – for help, for relief, for death – so the panic in her voice only managed to blend in with the dissonant chorus. Meanwhile, the blood continued to ooze out from under her hand and pool on the table. She could literally taste the man's death in her mouth. Or maybe that was her own blood, sharp and coppery from where she'd bitten the inside of her cheek.

Surprisingly enough, someone heard her plea and tossed a wrap her way. When the flash of white caught her eye, she snagged it from the air and quickly released the wound, ignoring both the blood that gushed out and the man's pained cry as she lifted his leg. But before she could begin to bind the tourniquet around his upper thigh, it was jerked from her hands.

"Don't waste the supplies. We need the bandages for others."

Jane glared at the doctor from across the table and motioned to the injured soldier. "And leave him to die?" Urgency made discretion a luxury they couldn't afford.

Keeping one hand on the wound, she made a grab for the tourniquet with the other, but it was pulled from her reach once again. "Leave him, Kate. He's already dead."

The soldier between them groaned faintly. "I'm going to be alright, aren't I?" A hand slick with blood clutched her wrist. "Miss, tell me I'm going to be okay. It doesn't hurt nearly so bad anymore. That's a good thing, right?"
Tears of frustration and anger burned in her eyes as she looked from the soldier's hopeful expression to Jack's resigned one. "He doesn't sound dead to me."

Judging by the soldier's repeated questions, it was obvious he couldn't hear anything they were saying. The explosion that had sent shrapnel to sever his femoral artery had probably ruptured his eardrums as well.

"This is war, Kate… these are the choices we have to make. You knew that when you signed up."

For such a simple thing to say, it was a difficult concept to grasp. It didn't matter that she'd lived through more wars than anyone could've ever imagined and knew just how grisly death could be. There was something vastly different between experiencing death as a bystander and voluntarily entering the fray to try and circumvent it.

She'd managed to evade the First World War by taking refuge in neutral Argentina. However, after seeing the devastation the rest of the world had suffered, her conscience wouldn't allow her to stand idly by when another one broke out. She wanted to help. She wanted to save lives. So when the opportunity arose, she signed up to be part of the Army Nurse Corps.

Eight months later, here she was: standing in a makeshift hospital tent, nervous sweat beading on her forehead and dripping between her shoulder blades, the smell of death and gunpowder on the air, up to her elbows in someone else's blood, questioning the wisdom in her decision.

The only thing that helped her maintain a bit of sanity was the knowledge that the casualties were lessening. When they'd first arrived in Sicily, they'd been so busy she didn’t slept for days. She had functioned on auto-pilot at the time. With her emotions numb, she was able to amputate a shattered arm, tend to a mottled burn courtesy of a grenade, whisper reassuring phrases to a man with a gaping hole in his stomach as he passed from one life to the next. It hadn't been until the stream of injured men began to slow that she broke down in tears, sobs so hard they were painful.

In the end, immortality didn't equal inhumanity any more than mortality equaled humanity.

"He’s bleeding out. He has a couple minutes at the most." Jack’s face softened a bit as he glanced down. Then he reached over the table and pulled her hand out of the soldier's. "There's nothing more we can do for him."

Blinking away the tears that threatened to fall, Jane allowed herself to be led away from the dying soldier and to the opposite side of the tent. In the background, she could hear the soldier cry out, asking where she was going, begging her to come back, and knew his voice would echo in her nightmares.

"Here." Jack motioned her towards a man who had just been laid out on a makeshift pallet. "This one you can save."

Jane looked over her shoulder, watching as the doctor moved back to the yelling soldier and called over a couple men who immediately picked up the stretcher. But she couldn't watch as they carried him through the flaps of the tent because she knew what happened next. They would take him to the outskirts of their camp, set him down in the line of other men sporting injuries too severe to be treated. There, he would eventually die.

"Kate!"

Spurred into action by Jack's prompt, she dropped to her knees beside her new charge. He rested on his back, hands clasped gently on top of his stomach. If not for the bandages covering his eyes and
the black residue and dried blood on his face, he would’ve appeared fine.

"Hello." She touched his upper arm lightly so he’d know she was there, and his head turned slightly towards her. "I'm going to remove your bandages so we can get you cleaned up."

"You have a nice voice. It's good to hear something pleasant when everything else sounds like this."

Gathering the last of her supplies, she prepared to begin. "Thank you. Now if you could lift your head for me..." Jane supported his head with one hand while the other unwound the wrappings. Fortunately, they came off easily, leaving only a few long strips of gauze covering his eyes. "You can lay back."

"I guess I'm lucky it was only my face. One of my buddies got hit square in the chest. He'd been ahead of us... crawled straight over the mine." His fingers twitched and tightened around each other. "They didn't even bring him in."

Spending most of her time tending to wounded soldiers hadn't prevented her from hearing the stories of what the battles were like. War had certainly advanced over time. In the past, there were swords and ships, pure strength and cunning. Now, there were guns and bombs, planes and submarines, ways to kill without being anywhere close to the enemy.

"I'm sorry." Most of the men told their stories through agonized screams or with pained grimaces. The way this one spoke of it so calmly made her heart ache. "I'm going to remove the gauze now. It might pull a little."

Carefully peeling up the far side, she slowly raised the rest of it. She ran her fingers along the underside of the gauze to loosen it and lifted the freed parts to better reach what remained. Like the wrapping, it came off easier than expected, and she turned to lay the gauze to the side. But when she turned back to the soldier with fresh cleaning cloths, she froze.

His skin was pockmarked with shards of shrapnel, some of them still leaking droplets of blood that trailed down his face, but that wasn't what made her hesitate.

It was the gaping holes where his eyes had been.

Jane stared down at the empty sockets. The lids and lashes had been torn away, leaving the ragged edges of skin the only thing rimming the space, and inside, there was nothing but bloody, blackened tissue. Her stomach roiled and her mind reeled, but her hands moved of their own accord, systematically cleaning the wounds and digging out the pieces of shrapnel.

"Is it very bad, ma'am?"

The distinction between good and bad was so different during war. "It could have been worse." Unlike his friend, at least he was alive.

"That's good." He paused, swallowed. "How long will it be before I can see?"

Everything seemed to crawl to a halt. Even her hands stilled from where they'd been about to pack fresh gauze into the sockets. Jane gaped at the soldier who couldn't see her, who wasn't even aware that he couldn't see her. He didn't know he'd lost his eyes, that he was blind, that he would never see again.

"Ma'am?" Reeling, she sat back onto her heels. "Ma'am, is everything okay?"

No... no, it wasn't. But it didn't matter how she felt. The only thing that mattered was doing her job
and saving his life. Even still, saving him from eventual death by infection didn't make her feel any better when his nose scrunched, his mouth turned down, and the corners of what used to be his eyes crinkled as she explained the situation. And it wasn't hard to surmise that, if his tear ducts hadn't been ruined, he probably would've cried.

Jane went through the rest of her duties like a robot. She wrapped his eyes with the fresh cloths, gathered the bloody ones, and piled them with the others waiting to be cleaned before moving on to the next soldier and stitching up the bullet wound in his back. And the next soldier with a bloody stump where his foot had been blown off. And the next soldier with shrapnel embedded in his neck.

Some days were worse than others, but clearly, the men had encountered serious issues on the front lines. But as a nurse, Jane's work was never done. So the day dragged on, which meant it felt much later than it was when she finally felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Why don't you turn in for the night?"

Letting the rags fall back into the cleaning bucket, she gripped the sides and met eyes that looked as exhausted as she felt. "It's only mid-afternoon."

"Then consider it an afternoon off." Jack brushed a lock of hair that had fallen into her face behind her ear. "Go get some rest."

"Sleep sounds fantastic, but I doubt I'll get any." Not with the blood and screaming that waited for her.

"Go see the newcomers, then. Rumor has it there's a group here from the States." The rags she reached for were resolutely yanked away. "I'm not going to let you work yourself into the ground. You're of no use to me if you're too tired to function."

She had absolutely no idea what to do – a good night's sleep was beyond her grasp and the idea of company sounded even less appealing than spending another twelve hours tending wounds – but she thanked Jack nevertheless and went outside.

Beyond the tent, Jane took a deep breath of marginally cleaner air. It still smelled of fire and powder, but the scent of death and antiseptic was less, not to mention she couldn't hear the pained cries as clearly. She stood there for a moment, uncertain where to go, but eventually wandered through a group of soldiers towards a secluded tree. There, she closed her eyes and collapsed back against it.

It took a moment for the music and singing to register. When they did, she opened her eyes just in time to see a group of women leaving a stage that had been set up across the clearing. They exited to uproarious applause from the soldiers seated in front of it, but the men quickly settled down when the only person left on the stage – a man dressed in an outlandish American pride inspired getup – approached the microphone.

"How many of you are ready to help me sock old Adolph on the jaw?"

The soldiers' silence was even worse after how loud they'd been for the women. It had been several months since she'd been able to watch any films, but she vaguely recalled seeing the star-spangled man in some of them. His stage name eluded her, though.

"Ok… um… I need a volunteer."

"I already volunteered. How do you think I got here?"

Laughter broke out among the soldiers as a second voice she recognized as Private Cantrell rang out.
"Bring back the girls!"

Jane glanced from the man on stage to Cantrell and back again as the laughter gave way to cheering. His act might have been a success back in the States, but here among men who had been hardened by the horrors of war, he was a joke.

Lighting the last cigarette from her pocket, she brought it to her mouth. It was a bad habit, one she'd picked up during her years in Chicago, but it helped to calm her frayed nerves. She could stop at any time. She'd done it before. But she'd started up again the first time a soldier died in her arms as she tried desperately to save him.

Exhaling the smoke, she felt the rising tension among the men. On stage, the man's discomfort was obvious. He shifted from one foot to the other, glanced to the side of the stage, and tried to regroup. "I think they only know the one song, but... let me... I'll see what I can do."

But just as he turned to go speak to whoever was on the edge of the stage, another soldier yelled out. "You do that, sweetheart." 

"Nice boots, tinkerbell."

He slowly shifted back towards the microphone. "Come on guys. We're all on the same team here." However, all attempts to reason were in vain, and everyone's attention was drawn to another soldier as he stood up and pulled down his pants.

"Hey, captain! Sign this!"

Frowning at the crude act, Jane looked back to the stage. The man raised his shield just in time to deflect a flying tomato. She straightened from the tree, cigarette dangling limply from her fingers, and watched as a second and third tomato was thrown at the stage. After the fourth, the man stepped back and paused before hurrying out of sight.

His exit marked the women's reentry and the soldiers' cheering. It only took roughly thirty seconds of the half-naked women prancing around and singing for Jane to lose interest. Instead, she watched for the man to leave the stage and make his way to one of the nearby tents. But he never showed. She kept her eyes trained on the sides of the stage, taking drag after drag until the cigarette was spent and flicked to the ground. Other men walked back and forth, but not the one she was looking for.

Without warning, thunder snarled across the sky. The occasional raindrops that had been falling for the past few days increased into a downpour and sent the soldiers and the performers scrambling for cover. If Jane were smart, she would've acted like everyone else and ran back to her own tent. It was what her mind insisted she do. However, her feet carried her towards the stage.

She sprinted through the storm, narrowly avoided slipping in a slick patch of grass, and ducked under the stage's protection. Preoccupied with shaking out her hair and patting down her clothes, she jumped when a voice came from behind her.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." Jane turned to find a man sitting on the steps that led up onto the stage, drawing pad in hand. Leaning forward, he extended his hand. "Steve Rogers."

"Kate Alexander." Shaking his hand, she eyed him critically. The clothes were a casual, nondescript brown, but there was something about his face that seemed familiar. Then it clicked. "Aren't you...?"

His genial smile fell as his hand slid from hers. "Captain America? Yes, I am."

Captain America. The stage name was even worse than she'd thought. Ridiculously hokey, it
definitely didn't belong in war-torn Italy. Still, it was apparently well-received back in the States and kept morale high, so who was she to judge.

Settling back onto the steps, Steve scanned her uniform. "Nurse Kate, I take it?" He didn't even appear fazed by the blood.

Jane nodded and, feeling the mud splatter onto her legs from the rain, moved further under the overhang. The drawing book was open on his lap again. She could just make out blurred shapes in front of a stage that could only be the soldiers.

"You shouldn't let them get to you."

The pencil continued, lining the entire width of the page in soldiers. Details were sparse but unnecessary. She could see the invisible jeers. "They hated me."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, they don't much like anyone. Except the women, of course." Steve's lips quirked as she lowered herself to sit on the bottom step. "It's not easy being on the front lines."

"And yet, that's where I always wanted to be."

"What happened?"

"Science." Naturally, she perked up at the comment, but he continued before she could ask for more information. "When I signed up, I never expected things would turn out like this. I should be doing more."

The troubled look on his face banished any more thoughts on science. She doubted he wanted to talk about whatever it was that had put him in his current position. But even if he wasn't content with where he was... "We all have a job to do."

"I had a friend who used to tell me the same thing." Steve issued a despondent chuckle. "If he could see me now, he'd laugh."

"Maybe not... at least you're doing something to help the war effort."

"What, dancing around like a puppet?" Their eyes briefly met before he gestured out to the tents. "Meanwhile, there are people fighting, dying for what they believe is right. You're of more help than me."

"I don't know about that." The breeze kicked up by the thunderstorm cooled the sweat still clinging to her back and her damp clothes, sending a chill through her, and she rubbed her arms in response. "Sometimes I feel like a puppet myself."

Jane rested her head against the metal stage supports. Most people were confined by the circumstances of their surroundings. She, however, was confined by time itself. They were completely different situations made similar by one common denominator: limitations.

Where others were limited by their mortal capabilities, Jane was limited by her immortal ones. Caution was an obligation, saying goodbye a necessity. People were born, left behind, died... and for all her power over time, she was powerless to stop anything else. So in the end, she was just as trapped as everyone else, a marionette forced to prance around all because of a mischievous god's supposed curiosity.

"Maybe we're all just monkeys dancing to another person's whims."
She looked away from the downpour and back to Steve to find him already watching her. "I don't mean to offend you, but if this is a pep talk, it's not a very good one."

The laugh burst from her mouth before she could stop it, but she was pleased to see Steve's expression lighten as well. "I'm sorry. You're right, that was awful." Jane shook her head. "Let me try again."

Optimism had become easier over the years, but it was still so easy to fall back into a pessimistic mindset if she wasn't careful. It had to be the connection she felt with Steve, with this Captain America. Seeing him struggle while authority over his life slipped through his fingers, as elusive as water or air… that spoke to her, reminded her of a thirteen century, disillusioned version of herself.

But if there was anything she'd learned from almost one thousand years of living, it was that she may not be able to control her circumstances, but she could control how she responded to them.

"The bottom line is, if you want to make a change, if you want to do something, do it. Because no one else will do it for you."

Steve's focus lowered to his drawing book, fingers tight around the pencil, furrow between his brows. "It's not that easy."

"Isn't it? Trust me when I say that if you don't try to control your own life, someone will do it for you." She took a deep breath. "Just something to think about."

Lightning illuminated the darkened camp, thunder following soon after, but when she looked out, the rain had eased somewhat. It wouldn't last for long, though. Not if the heavy, low-slung clouds overhead were anything to go by.

"Anyway, I should probably get back to my tent while the rain's let up. I need to at least try to get some sleep before my next shift." Standing up, she brushed off her skirt and extended her hand. "It was a pleasure."

Looking marginally better, he stood to shake her hand, and she smiled up at him. "Likewise." The second time around she could feel how soft his palm was and knew that, if he ever did decide to act on what he wanted, he'd have a nasty set of blisters before calluses would mark his hands as those of a soldier. Although, at the same time, she got the impression he wouldn't mind.

"Take care, Captain America."

Splashing through the mud and rain, Jane ran across the clearing and ripped through the flap of her tent. The dirty uniform was stripped away to be replaced with a clean one she would wear until her next round in the infirmary began. At the thought, an uneasy weight settled in the pit of her stomach. She didn't dread tending to the men because it was all in an effort to save their lives, but she couldn't deny that she dreaded the way their injuries haunted her. Eventually, though, exhaustion would catch up with her and the restless tossing and turning would give way to sleep. She could only hope tonight would be one of those nights her sleep was a dreamless one.

Jane was just about to lay down when, on a whim, she walked back to the front of her tent. Pulling aside the flap, she stared across the camp to the stage. She could just make out the figure still seated on the stairs through the downpour that had picked back up, but beside him was another form. Curvy and dark-haired, the newcomer was clearly a woman. The distance between them discredited Jane's initial suspicion that the woman was a fan. Even from across the way, she could sense the tension between them. Whoever she was, though, she was clearly a part of the military.
With a tired shrug, she let the tent flaps fall closed once more. The group from the States was supposed to be around camp for a few days. If she wanted, she could find Steve and ask about his friend tomorrow or the next day when she got a break.

But when she woke up the next morning, she found out that Captain America and his mysterious female friend had disappeared.

And the morning after that, she was told to pack her things because she’d be leaving with the 36th Infantry Division as they moved further into Italy.

Two months and four hundred miles later, Jane practically fell out of the medical vehicle, limbs stiff and tingling from too many hours spent cramped in the small cab. She moved to the side to allow the other passengers a way out and leaned back against the vehicle, wincing when something in her back popped as she stretched her arms above her head.

"When do you think we'll get there?"

Jane turned to the approaching woman. Cecelia, one of four other nurses who were part of their journey, unfolded herself after clambering from the vehicle to join her. "I think we’re here… or as close as we’re going to get." They weren’t within sight of the Rapido River yet, but the commanders must have had a reason for stopping so far away from their goal.

Their infantry had suffered increasingly heavy casualties the further they moved into Italy. The Germans had constructed three defensive lines across the country – the Barbara, the Reinhard, and the Gustav. The first had been relatively easy to overcome, resulting in few casualties. The second had provided more of a challenge but had also eventually fallen to their troops. However, intelligence had informed them that the Gustav Line, a system of interlocking defenses that spanned the narrowest part of the country along the Garigliano and Rapido Rivers, would be the most fortified.

Cecelia watched a group of soldiers begin to pull items from the trucks. "I'm assuming we'll set up camp here while the men continue on?"

"Most likely so." Those men not setting up tents were gathering packs and distributing rations, confirming Cecelia's question. "That's fine by me. My legs still hurt from sitting so long."

The two women watched as the camp was gradually erected. Cecelia was eventually called over to help set up the medical tent, but Jane remained by the truck. It was while she was smiling and watching a soldier shamelessly flirt with another of the nurses that she spied a movement from the corner of her eye.

There, partially hidden in the foliage surrounding the trees, was a familiar figure who, upon realizing he'd captured her attention, ducked behind the trunk.

With a look around to make sure everyone else was preoccupied, Jane crossed to the tree Loki had disappeared behind. Discretion had never been her forte, but she gave it her best effort, trying to seem casual as she laid a hand on the trunk and stared off into the woods. When the bark gave way to sun-warmed leather, she smiled.

"Since when does a Prince of Asgard have nothing better to do than traipse around in Midgardian woods?"
"I see you've been practicing the dialect. You could almost pass for an Æsir." Her grin widened into a full-blown smile even as his tone darkened. "What are you doing here?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" To anyone else, she was only inspecting the berries dangling from the bush in front of her, but the slight tilt to her head allowed her to peek at the God of Mischief.

His eyes narrowed, unamused. "You're in the middle of yet another war. After all these centuries, one would think you'd learn to avoid them."

"It's good to see you too, Loki."

"Jane…" There was no compromise in his voice. It bode no argument, demanded an answer.

To get out of view, she squeezed between the bush's brambles and Loki's chest. Not touching him wasn't an option with the narrow space available, but she persistently refused to meet his eyes in an attempt to ignore the smirk he was probably wearing at the blush spreading across her face. Once she was past him and hidden behind the tree, she gathered what remained of her pride, crossed her arms, and met his eyes.

She was right.

He was smirking.

"I get tired of always being a bystander. There may not be much I can do to help, but I've learned enough to try and save those I can." Occasionally, the risk was worth the reward. "And anyways, avoiding this war is pretty much impossible considering most of the world is involved."

Loki shook his head, expression falling somewhere between disbelief and exasperation. Around the background noise of the soldiers setting up camp, she barely caught his mutter. "Humans…" But before she could call him out, he continued. "One of these days, you'll find yourself in a situation from which you cannot escape."

"You might be surprised to know I've become quite the escape artist over the years."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Jane arched a brow and perfectly imitated his arrogant tone. "I managed to get out of that mess with the trade ship."

In the late eighteenth century, when Europe was in the throes of what people now called the Industrial Revolution, Britain profited heavily by participating in the slave trade. It was during that time she'd been kidnapped and sold to a slave ship bound for Australia. Jane could testify as to just how much alcohol it took to get the quartermaster inebriated enough to free her.

"Not to mention the fact I got out of those riots in America without getting caught by the law."

The years before the outbreak of the Civil War had been filled with tension. A majority of it was in regards to slavery, but some could also be attributed to the implementation of tariffs on international trade. Georgia had been one of several states that took part in riots protesting how the trade barriers were harmful to the South but favored the North. When the law keepers had tried to restore order, she'd been forced to hide in a dingy alleyway until the commotion had passed.

"And the one time I was caught by the law, I picked the lock."
It would have only been one night spent in the prison, penance for being in the possession of alcohol during the Prohibition, but she'd used a discarded needle and her hairpin to pick her way free. Jane smiled at the memory. They were all excellent examples, but that one she was quite proud of.

Loki, who had been silently listening, plucked a leaf from the closest branch and began to casually dismember it. When only half remained, his gaze lifted to hers. "You seem to be overlooking the years you spent playing at piracy."

The reference was a dash of ice water, stealing away her smug grin. "That doesn't count."

Jane was rightfully piqued. Why would he even bring that up? She knew how he felt about that period in her life. At the time, his play at indifference on the docks had been half-hearted at best. Now, it just seemed transparent, threadbare. Their growing friendship had only helped to destroy that image.

That, and their shared kiss… or kisses.

Because there had been not only one, but two.

Not that she thought about things like that. She didn't think about either of them. Not at all. Loki probably didn't either. It was easier to attribute the first to a part of his mischievous act and the second to her drunken state. If not, she might have to actually acknowledge that… no, it was definitely easier to write off both the occurrences without thinking about them. They certainly didn't talk about them.

"Why not?"

It took Jane one frighteningly long second to realize Loki's question was in response to her dismissal of having not escaped Kidd and not her thoughts on why they didn't discuss… the things they didn't discuss. When she did, she let out a relieved breath.

"Because that was the point I realized I couldn't always depend on someone else, that I needed to learn how to save myself."

"And what happens if you're unable?"

Jane shrugged. "I guess I'd say my goodbyes and welcome the shining halls of Valhalla. Or wait for you to rescue me." Then she smirked up at him, the awkwardness she felt before melting away. "Would you save me?"

"Again?"

For the second time in the conversation, her smirk slipped a bit, this time as Loki took one confident step forward. Retreat was a knee-jerk reaction, but the brambles at her back prevented escape, which meant the only remaining option was to lift her chin and confirm with as much assurance as she could muster.

"Again." Because apparently being indebted to him for saving her life twice – what was it with them doing things in pairs? – wasn't enough. At his silence, she prompted. "Well?"

Loki’s attention flicked back and forth, lowered to focus unseeingly on what might have been her jawline, then returned to hers. "If only Íðunn had thought to cultivate apples that provide strength in addition to eternal life."

"Is that a yes?"
Loki issued a long-suffering sigh, but the sentiment didn't quite reach his eyes. Instead of being sharp or weary, they softened, betraying just a hint of something she was hesitant to label as genuine affection.

Suddenly, a noise sounded from the camp, making her jump. She was in the process of leaning over to peer around both Loki and the tree in search of the source when a few soldiers' laughter reached her. Whatever happened, it was clearly unimportant. Returning to her previous position, she scanned the woods to either side. Another bang and more laughter from the camp drowned out Loki's reply – or it might have been a retort; who knew with him – but just as she was turning back to ask him to repeat himself, she stopped.

It was quick, but there was no denying she'd seen movement. She stared at the shadowy spot, the darkness dappled by the gloomy-tinted sunlight that filtered through the canopy overhead, with suspicion. There was the possibility it had only been some wild animal. Today wouldn't be the first time their group had startled the native wildlife. However, the alternative possibility was much more pressing… because if what she'd seen was a member of the German defensive line, their entire camp was in trouble.

Loki spoke again, and although the words didn't register, his irritated inflection did.

The Prince of Asgard was not used to being ignored.

Deep in the woods, nothing else moved, and Jane felt her frown smooth away at the lack of action. It was probably only a deer, maybe even a bird of some kind. Turning back to Loki and his perturbed expression, she tried to make amends.

"I'm sorry." Even though being annoyed just because she hadn't heard him was a little childish.
"Over there…" She gestured in the direction she'd been staring. "I thought I saw…"

And when she glanced that way again, it was so unexpected that it took her doing a double take to register what she saw.

A hint of fire that brightened the shadows, a charcoal hand tipped in claws that curled around the tree, a mouth bared in a vicious snarl that leisurely slid into view… and Jane felt the blood in her veins run cold as she sucked in a sharp breath.

"Loki!"

But before either of them could act, the ground around them exploded, and Jane was sent flying.

Thrown from the wooded area and into the clearing, she landed hard on her back. The impact knocked the breath from her lungs, left her wheezing as one hand grasped her chest and the other struggled to push off from the ground. It took a while for her lungs to operate again. It took even longer for the eerie ringing in her ears to give way to the sounds of battle.

Jane crab-crawled backwards and pressed her back against the closest thing she saw: one of the transport vehicles. At least marginally more protected, she scanned her surroundings, took in the foreign uniforms of the men who now surrounded the camp, the telltale swastikas on their sleeves.

Bullets riddled the truck above her. She ducked, but the arms covering her head couldn't block out the sound of screaming. They were very different, the screams of battle versus the screams of pain. A glance revealed a handful of soldiers lying injured in the open, crimson holes in various parts of their body, life trailing behind them as they tried to crawl to safety. In the background, the German soldiers strategically advanced.
Another line of gunfire kicked up a spray of dust to her left. Through the cloud, Jane was just able to make out the green and black figure that was Loki, although he was in a different spot than before. The blast must have also displaced him.

Her first thought – as she watched a soldier fall a few feet in front of her, blood gurgling from the hole in his neck – was that she wished Loki would come help her.

Her second thought – as she remembered how they'd just been talking about her ability to escape situations – was to dismiss the first.

She could escape. She'd done it before. There had been plenty of times she'd saved herself, sometimes against seemingly impossible odds. Still, there was only so much she could do when their encampment was literally surrounded by enemies.

And speaking of enemies…

A growl, so low she felt the vibrations more than she actually heard the sound, distracted her from the raging battle. Fragments of dust still hovered in the air around her, but they weren't thick enough to disguise the monstrous form that now towered behind Loki. The God of Mischief's back was to her, the fire giant with its grin and molten body consuming his attention, which explained why he hadn't yet helped her.

It had been so long since there’d been any hard evidence of the fire giants' presence that she'd started to believe Loki had put an end to their hunt back in Russia. Clearly, she'd been wrong. The fire giants were still very much a presence in her realm, still very much in pursuit.

Something hard collided with the vehicle, jarring it behind her, but Jane was too preoccupied watching the otherworldly figures to find out what happened. So quick she could barely see it, Loki lunged at the fire giant only for it to dodge and disappear. Another thud rocked the vehicle as Loki turned in a quick circle, searching for his foe.

The small tendril of hope Jane felt was quickly extinguished when another growl sounded, this time from her right. She turned, looked past the fallen soldier beside her to the fire giant standing in the woods to her right. Their eyes met – wide brown and glowing red – and her mouth fell open as its split in a wicked grin.

"Jane!"

Loki's yell returned life to her body. Ignorant of the bullets peppering the ground around her, she scrambled to her feet and sprinted towards him. She kept her eyes trained on her goal, on Loki, even as she felt the ground shake with the giant's footsteps. Heat burned at her back, ever increasing, and she was so sure she wasn't going to make it… but then Loki's hands moved, wisps of magic transforming ordinary air into daggers that flew over her head and caused the giant to roar.

Jane leaped the last few feet, jumping into Loki's arms. Holding tight, she closed her eyes and buried her face in his chest. They spun, one of his arms left her side to move in a violent motion, and as the pressure of space closed around them, the fire giant's growl turn into a strangled gurgle and a bright light flashed through her eyelids.

The minute solid ground materialized beneath Jane's feet, her arms tightened impossibly more around
Loki's neck as she whispered through the silence. "Is it gone? Is it dead?"

"Yes."

"Will the soldiers find it?"

His head dipped, breath ghosting over the shell of her ear. "No. I sent him back to Muspelheim to die."

"Good." Unlike Loki, Jane's exhale was shaky and warm as it rebounded off his armored chest. Part of her trembling could be attributed to their method of travel; the rest, to the showdown in the battlefield. "At least that way anyone who might have seen it can write it off as a hallucination."

"If any of them survive."

Her stomach clenched. "Right… if."

A cool breeze brushed against her legs, and she opened her eyes to see the edge of a cliff and, far below, snow-covered treetops. There was nothing distinctive about it, no unique landmarks to reveal where Loki had taken them, but right then it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the sticky wetness she felt when her fingers brushed the back of Loki's neck.

It took a moment of rubbing her fingers together for her to realize what it was. And when she looked at her fingers over Loki's shoulder and saw them covered in red, she jerked in his arms.

"You're hurt."

His arms remained firm around her, which left Jane leaning back against them to give her room to meet his eyes, the blood leaving red fingerprints when she pressed her hands to his chest. The distance allowed her to see a couple other injuries. A purple bruise already forming at his temple, a smear of blood at the corner of his mouth... there was a shallow scratch that followed his left cheekbone as well. That one, though, was already clotted with dried blood.

"I'm fine."

"You're bleeding."

"I'll be fine." Loki tilted his head away from her examining fingers. "It would take more than a Midgardian weapon to truly harm me."

Jane studied him, still a little worried, but dropped the issue. After all, the injuries didn't appear to be bothering him in any way. With that reassuring thought, she stopped trying to push way and allowed Loki to draw her closer.

Between his arms around her waist, her hands on his shoulders, and the way their faces tilted towards each other with less than a foot of space separating them, she was distinctly reminded of Gone with the Wind and imagined they looked an awful lot like Rhett Butler and Scarlet O'Hara. Though, she couldn't imagine Loki telling her that she should be kissed, and often, and by someone who knows how.

"Thank you."

"What?"

"Thank you for saving me." And because she was respectful enough to give credit where credit was
due: "Again." She nibbled at her lower lip, not missing the way his eyes briefly dipped to watch the act. When they returned to hers, she offered a small smile. "So about what we were discussing earlier… I'm guessing you'd save me if I ever got myself into a mess from which I couldn't escape?"

He breathed a laugh, looking for all the world like a man resigning himself to a newly discovered fate.

"Yes, Jane." One set of his fingers began to trace a meandering path up her spine. "So long as I am able, I will save you."

"Then I'm your eternal burden."

Loki's fingers reached her neck, twisted in the locks of hair that had come loose. "There are worse things." And his gaze might as well have been more dangerous than the fire giant's attacks for all the intensity of it, the way it burned into her.

In the end, perhaps they weren't very different from Rhett and Scarlet… because when Jane impulsively rose onto her tiptoes and captured Loki's lips, all she could think was that if she should be kissed, and often, and by someone who knows how, he more than adequately filled that role.

The hand not tangled in her hair lifted, thumb pressing to her jaw, encouraging her to tilt her head. Jane felt him seek entrance, willingly opened to him, and their tongues danced together as her arms wound securely around his neck.

He tasted like night, dusky skies and flickering stars and wide, open spaces…

Like magic, clear and vibrant with an energy that sparked…

Like sin, forbidden and dangerous and darkly seductive…

Their breaths mingled in the infinitesimal space between them when the kiss ended. Neither of them pulled away. They remained motionless, foreheads pressed together, noses bumping. It might have been ten minutes or it could only have been ten seconds, but when Loki finally spoke, the feeling of his lips brushing against hers as they formed words was almost as addicting as full-blown contact.

"No more wars, Jane."

And after kissing him again – fiercely, firmly, without abandon – she pulled away to murmur back against his lips just as quietly. "No more wars."

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – as part of World War II, the Allied Powers invaded Sicily under the codename Operation Husky in July 1943. For the next year, they continue their campaign through Italy and towards Rome. In January of 1944, the 36th Infantry Division took part in a grueling battle that virtually destroyed the regiments as they tried to secure a bridgehead across the Rapido River. Eventually, though, the campaign would continue as Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark led the troops up the Italian peninsula, resulting in the liberation of Rome in June 1944.

Also, I hope the special cameo from Captain America was a nice surprise. Jane’s comment about people being nothing more than monkeys dancing is meant to lead into
the scene in Captain America: The First Avenger where Peggy shows up and makes a similar comment about Steve’s drawing.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Life’s been more than a little hectic lately. I’m still managing to keep to the every-other-week updating schedule, but I’m barely scraping by with my review responses before I post the next chapter. I promise to get to them faster from here on, though, because I see a figurative light at the end of the tunnel. Hope you all enjoy this monster of a chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven

“I have a fire in my fingers, and I want to believe in this, in me, in you and the way your eyes burn when you look at me.”

1962: Ceylon

"Do you know what I've noticed?"

The newly-arrived figure stepped out of the shadowed corner of the living room. "What's that?"

"That lamp…" Without looking away from the book in her lap, Jane pointed to the object of interest. "Flickers every time you arrive. It's not very noticeable or very long, but it does. And it's the only one that does. Do you know why that is?"

She scribbled down the current date and time in the pocket-sized notebook on the couch beside her. It had become a habit of hers, taking note of every time Loki visited and chronicling whenever something seemed to give a sign of his arrival.

The first time she'd noticed it had been in an old barometer. It had hung beside her kitchen window, a simple way to predict the changes in weather. However, one day, while she'd been washing dishes, the mercury had jumped before returning to normal. The only thing she could think of to explain the anomaly was Loki, who had just disappeared back to Asgard. With that thought in mind, she'd purchased three more barometers before his next arrival and strategically placed them around her house. Words failed to describe her excitement when the one closest to Loki reacted the next time he showed up.

Jane had started to run with a few ideas, but her studies had come to a screeching halt when the barometers stopped working. He could disappear in the same room with no results. He could disappear right beside one with no reaction.

It had been frustrating.
But that had also been the same time static began to buzz in her radio in the seconds before he arrived. And when the radio had ceased being a predictor, the lamp had started flickering.

So not only was it frustrating, it didn't make sense.

"I can't say I do." Loki settled into the nearby armchair, looking for all the world like he belonged in her meager flat instead of another realm entirely. "Do you?"

Dropping the pen between the pages, Jane leaned back against the couch. The issues with the barometer had seemed promising in the beginning. If changes in atmospheric pressure were a forewarning of whenever Loki travelled through space-time, that was something she could study, something she could attempt to explain. However, the reactions from the radio and the lamp had nullified that theory.

"No." Her head fell to the side to meet his eyes. "No, I don't." Then she sighed. "I don't know if I ever will."

One corner of his mouth twitched in an almost-smile, but it was gone before it really had time to form. "Magic is unexplainable. No amount of numbers, equations, or theories can unravel its secrets. I've told you that before."

"I know… there has to be a way, though." Tossing aside years of studying and invested time in research wasn't an option. She couldn't give up. "Magic is just something science hasn't been able to explain yet." She'd said the same thing to an elderly gentleman after listening to his theories on magic versus technology.

"Magic is magic."

"If I were to go back in time and show thirteenth century highlanders electricity or cars or radios, they'd think it was magic." Jane breathed a chuckle. "Hell, I would've thought it was magic. But that's only because science hadn't advanced enough to explain it."

The chair squeaked a protest as he relaxed further into the cushions and crossed his arms. "One day, Jane, you'll see that this goal you've fixated on is futile."

"I'd like to think I'll end up proving you wrong."

"Unlikely."

"But possible." Granted, it was a slim chance, but a chance nonetheless.

From outside came cheering as one group of kids bested another in a game of cricket. Inside, however, they sat in relative silence, the only sounds being Jane's fingernails as they repeatedly scraped the book's binding and the thump of Loki's feet coming to rest on the coffee table. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, though, just… typical.

Jane pulled her legs onto the couch and crossed them. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Move between the realms. Move through space at all." Her attention shifted to the ceiling to stare at the crisscrossing lines of evening light filtering through the shutters. "When you want to travel, do you just open a bridge and… step through?"

"The Bi-Frost is the only bridge, so to speak. My movements have nothing to do with bridges."
"I don't mean bridge as in a literal bridge." Gods and their technicalities. "It's called an Einstein-Rosen bridge, but it's really just a wormhole."

Loki frowned. "No, there are no holes involved either."

"Alright..." Jane bit back her sigh. For so many years, she'd been the one oblivious to what happened around her – technically, she was still oblivious regarding most things – but it was easier to be patient when she knew his comments were a result of him, for once, having no idea what she meant. His smug attitude made more sense now. Knowledge was power. "No bridges, no holes. What would you call it then?"

"I don't call it anything. It's magic."

Setting the book aside, she tucked one leg under the other, turning until she was sitting sideways on the couch to better face Loki. "But how do you do it?"

"Magic."

"I know, but—"

"That is all there is, Jane." The snapped words made the words die in her throat, her teeth clicking as her mouth shut. They stared at each other for a long moment before her eyes fell. When he spoke again, though, the harshness had left his voice. "There's no secret to it, no explanation that can be quantified or examined. I simply find the seams in space and open them enough to move through to wherever I wish to be."

Jane stared at the floral pattern of the couch, distractedly nibbling at her lower lip. Part of her wanted to ignore what he said, get up and leave the room, but another part of her wanted to question him further, pick apart his statement to discover the details that resided beneath.

In the end, the budding scientist in her won out.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes to find him watching her. "How do you know that whatever... seam you open will lead where you want to go?"

"Magic."

Of course.

"And practice." She'd just decided on leaving, figuring the conversation would only continue to circle the magic answer, but the added words made her pause. "After enough times using them, it becomes easier to understand which paths are able take me where I want."

Frozen with legs halfway unfolded to the floor and one hand pushed into the couch cushion to help her stand, she stared at him critically. The answer was still vague, something she couldn't even hope to fully understand, but it was an answer nevertheless. A spring in the couch popped as she sat back down, although she didn't relax as much as before.

"So you have to find the seams before you can travel. Does that mean they're not everywhere?"

When he smirked, it was her turn to frown. "I thought you were capable of figuring out a method of travel on your own using your... science."

"Well, if you believe science to be so inferior, you should have no reason not to tell me." Jane crossed her arms for good measure. "Unless this is one of those times you decide you want to be
mysteriously silent, of course."

His smirk widened into an outright grin as he chuckled softly to himself. "There are countless seams. Yggdrasil was formed upon them. But I still have to locate one before I travel. If not... if I were to just open unconnected space, I'd likely enter the Void."

"The Void?" Jane's fingers were itching to grab her notebook and write down everything he was saying.

For the first time since he sat down, Loki looked away from her. "An empty, vast place that operates outside the basic structures that govern the rest of Yggdrasil." He stared at some point past her, towards the hallway leading to the bedroom or maybe at the wall that held a few pieces of artwork she'd collected.

"Operates outside the basic structures... what do you mean?" She fought the urge to wave her hand in an attempt to recapture his attention.

"Finiteness. Time. Gravity."

"So there's no passage of time in the Void? Or an end?" The first was mind-boggling; the second, not so much. For all she knew, her own realm was without end.

Loki shook his head. "You can blink and one second will have passed, or you can blink and one thousand years will have passed. There's no rhyme or reason to its functioning. Very few who have entered the Void manage to escape."

"Have you ever been in it?"

"No."

It wasn't difficult to believe. After all, if what he said was true, then only a mistake on Loki's part would result in him entering the Void, and mistakes weren't exactly something she could see being a problem for him. She doubted he did anything without knowing exactly what would happen beforehand.

"I bet if you did find yourself in the Void, you'd be able to escape easily." Brow knitting slightly, he blinked, his eyes finding hers once more. "Since you're so adept at travelling without the Bi-Frost."

A sort of seriousness had overtaken him while they discussed the Void, but it slipped away when he sat up in the armchair. "Perhaps." His feet reconnected with the floor, elbows resting on his knees as he leaned forward, hands loosely clasped between his legs. "So you believe these bridges you spoke of would explain travel between realms?"

"The Einstein-Rosen bridges? Yes, if I could figure out how they worked." The notebooks stacked precariously on the bookshelf were proof of just how badly she wanted it. "And not just between realms. It would explain all of the travelling you can do."

"Yet science refuses to yield results."

Jane's mouth tightened into a thin line. "Clearly."

"And still you persist."

Then her mouth relaxed, a fierce sense of determination welling up in her. "Always."
The weight of Loki's regard was almost stifling, even if it was devoid of emotion. She'd never understand his unfailing ability to get under her skin with just one look when it was expressionless. It was a gift, one she didn't particularly enjoy. If only she could affect him as easily. But Jane's thoughts cut off abruptly when he stood, mind going blank as she craned her head to hold his gaze.

"After all these years…" He stepped around the coffee table towards her. "After all you've lived through and experienced…" He nudged apart her legs, neatly moving to stand between them. "You are still very much human."

One edge of Loki's surcoat was caught between the outside of his leg and the inside of her right thigh where they pressed together, the other curling around the outside of her left leg. The loose end shifted with him, the light touch giving her goosebumps and making her wish she was wearing something other than shorts.

It was incredibly intimidating, the position they were in. Loki stood above her, cool and collected, while Jane continued to stare up at him, hoping the out-of-control beating of her heart wasn't apparent on her face. But then he moved.

He lowered until he sat on the edge of the coffee table, both knees pressed against the insides of her legs, leaning towards her with elbows resting on his knees much as he had when he sat in the armchair.

"They never know when to give up."

It took Jane a moment to remember what they'd been talking about. She was too distracted by the slight quirk of his lips, the way he'd snagged a stray thread from the end of her shorts and begun to twist it around his fingers, the occasional contact on the inside of her thigh.

"Humans are…" Her words hitched, and she fought the urge to look down when his fingers brushed more purposefully against her skin.

"Eternally stubborn?" He offered the suggestion with a smirk that said he knew exactly what he was doing and the effect he was having on her and that he was enjoying every minute of it.

Abruptly, Jane sat back. The thread slipped from Loki's fingers as he pulled back just a bit as well. "I was going to say resilient." The added distance helped clear her mind. That, and the loss of his fingers against her leg, even though his knees still pressed against them.

"Hm."

The ceiling fan whirred above them, the dangling chain clinking against the globe. Most of the time the sound annoyed her, but right then she wished it was even louder. That way she wouldn't have heard Loki's quiet hum. It always made her nervous.

"So what will you do now, Jane Foster?" His eyes dipped as he leaned a little closer, rose back to hers, head canting to the side. "What will you do with all your resilience and your nonexistent answers?"

"Keep trying. It's the only thing I can do." Jane smiled faintly and echoed centuries-old words. "It's a good thing I have an eternity to figure it out."

And like her, Loki grinned in return, having recognized the banter. "Still not long enough."

Without warning, he disappeared, and the lamplight to her right blinked. Jane also blinked, only she did it three or four times before rotating from one side to the other on the couch, searching the room
for any sign of him. Why had he left? She hadn't said anything out of the ordinary. And while their conversation hadn't been the most easygoing one they'd ever had, it hadn't seemed to bother him very much, not with the way he'd approached her.

"Well, I don't know what that was all about, but…"

With a huff, she returned to her prior position and picked up the book she'd set aside earlier. It fell open to the earmarked page, but instead of reading about quantum field theory and trying to figure out how its exotic matter could allow an Einstein-Rosen bridge to remain open for a longer period of time, Jane stared at the spot on the coffee table where Loki had been sitting and absentmindedly rubbed her legs. He'd been so close, touched her unnecessarily… the insides of her legs still tingled where they'd pressed against his pants.

In a bid to get her mind off Loki, she reached for the small notebook to make note of the lamp flickering when he'd left. Old habits, no matter how useless they might be, die hard. But where her hand should've closed around the notebook, it went right through it instead. And from the corner of her eye, she noticed the lamp flicker again.

She stared at her fingers, at the greenish hue that covered them as they sunk into the falsified image. "You didn't stay gone for very long." The copy of the notebook wavered then went out, and Jane was left looking at the cushion.

"Would you miss me if I had?"

"I would've missed my notebook." Letting her head fall back, she stared up at Loki who stood behind the couch, his hands resting on either side of her head. "Can I have it back?"

"Why do you need it?"

"Because." And since she knew exactly what he would say next, she smoothly cut him off. "I just do, Loki. Now would you please conjure it back from whatever hidden place you sent it?"

Neither of them moved, remaining at their stubborn impasse as the seconds ticked by, but just when they rounded the minute mark, Jane noticed the item that had magically reappeared beside her. Her eyes flicked down to the notebook, up to the inverted Loki, and out at the rest of the ceiling before she finally turned away completely. Picking up the notebook, she flipped to the ribbon-marked spot and jotted down the information.

September 6, 1962 – 7:38 pm – flickering lamplight

It was just another entry in a long list of entries. The pages were filled with observance after observance, along with the occasional side notes that indicated her changing locations. And that was only in the current book.

The one above the most recent entry read September 6, 1962 – 7:01 pm – flickering lamplight. The one above that read July 18, 1962 – 10:38 am – flickering lamplight. And if she were to flip back through the pages, she'd find one that read December 25, 1961 – 11:50 pm – radio static.

"Does that aid in your search?" Loki was slightly leaning over the couch now, peering around her head to read the scribbled words.

"Not yet, but someday it might. It's the only actual observations I can document right now. I'd like to think that, eventually, it'll come in handy."

The ribbon slipped between the pages, and the notebook closed with a snap. But before Jane could
set it down, she felt the tips of Loki's hair brush against her cheek as he bent down to pluck the book from her hands. His sudden closeness was unexpected, and she fought the knee-jerk reaction to pull away if only because that was most likely the reaction he was after.

"You know, machines and science and observations are not required to feel magic."

Rotating on the couch, Jane followed his retreat. "What?"

"If you're in tune with your surroundings, you can feel its traces." It was entirely possible she resembled a fish as she turned to stare up at him, eyes wide and mouth slack. "Most people, humans and Æsir alike, are too unaware of what's occurring right in front of them to sense something so delicate as magic. But anyone is capable so long as they concentrate and know what to feel for."

Enough cognitive thought returned for Jane's mouth to snap closed, but she continued to regard him intently, mutely, almost reverently, because a forthcoming Loki was not the Loki she was familiar with at all.

"How to feel magic instead of relying on sight alone was one of the first lessons my mother taught me. Eyes can be deceiving… that's what she'd always say."

"Your mother taught you?"

Later, she would berate herself for choosing that particular aspect to focus on. Of all things—feeling magic, the fact that anyone could feel magic, discussing magic in general—her mind had latched on to the mention of his mother. Granted, it wasn't something prone to coming up in their conversations. In all the years they'd known each other, Loki had only talked about his brother twice and his father once. But still, she was choosing personal details over magic and science.

The corner of Loki's mouth twitched at her question. "Among others."

Jane recognized the secretive smirk that eased across his face well enough to know that would be the end of any discussions involving his mother and backtracked accordingly. "So what does magic feel like then?" Standing, she began to move around the couch. "What are people supposed to feel for?"

Keen eyes followed her progress from the moment she stood to the moment she stopped next to him and leaned against the back of the couch, side by side but facing opposite directions. They regarded each other, and Jane pretended not to notice their closeness, the fingers that just barely brushed against her left hip if she fidgeted.

"Magic is subtle, gentle. It doesn't announce its presence like a storm or consume you like a fire. There's no heralding trumpets or fanfare. You have to focus…” The hand beside her hip moved, a single finger lifting to trace a long, slow line from her wrist to her elbow. "It's the tingle in your skin, the chill that races up your spine, the whisper in your ear."

And suddenly, between his lowered voice and the rasp of the last few words, their situation seemed fuzzy.

Indistinct.

Suggestive.

And Jane wasn't so sure if magic was the only thing they were talking about anymore.

She fought for control, struggled for it in the wake of the newly quickened pace of her heartbeat, but as Loki's finger rounded her elbow and continued up her arm, she felt her tenuous hold falter. Mouth
slipping open, she sucked in a harsh breath. And as she let it out in a heavy rush, her eyes dipped, falling to his lips, the strong line of his jaw, the hollow at the base of his throat.

The atmosphere was electric between them, all pressure and friction and redolence, charged by his words and sparking with the touch of his hand against her arm. And Jane had no way of knowing if she was the only one experiencing it, but it was tangible enough to steal what little air remained from her lungs.

Just when she wasn't sure she could take any more, Loki's hand fell away and returned to the couch. "It's difficult to explain. Like I said, most will never pick up on it."

Even though Jane felt the loss of contact keenly, the waning tension was welcome. Still, her thoughts were slow to fall back into place. When they did, her eyes returned to his. "Do you think I could?"

"Possibly." His head tilted in thought. "I would think you more able than most."

"Can I try?"

There was a moment of hesitation, of wary observation, before Loki's hand wrapped around her wrist. Only once he'd led her away from the couch and stopped in the empty space between the piece of furniture and the wall did he release her.

"Concentrate."

Loki disappeared.

The lamp flickered.

And Jane felt nothing.

With a frown pulling at her features, she ignored the second flicker as he reappeared a few feet in front of her and scowled at him. "Nothing." There was no tingle, no chill, no whisper… there was only the sting of disappointment.

Surprise flitted across Loki's face before dissolving into a contemplative look. "Concentrate harder, but don't think about doing it."

"That makes absolutely no sense."

"It does." He shook his head. "If you're thinking about concentrating, you'll miss it. You have to concentrate on the air around you, feel the invisible currents of the universe."

But when he disappeared and reappeared again, this time directly in front of her, she experienced the same result. "Still nothing."

"Interesting." The way Loki said it made it sound like she was a particularly confusing problem. "I would've thought that, after all these years, you'd be able to sense it. Perhaps…" He paused, searched for a solution, then smiled slightly. "Try closing your eyes."

Jane arched an eyebrow, curious and distrustful all at the same time. "Will that really help?" But she didn't receive an answer, just one of his looks that bid no argument.

Dutifully, she closed her eyes and almost immediately felt her other senses pick up the slack, working overtime to accommodate the lack of sight. There was the faint scent of lavender and sage from the candle burning in the kitchen, the sensation of the loose thread dangling from the hem of her
shorts tickling against her thigh, the low reverberations of Loki's voice in the space between them.

"Focus on the details. The ticking clock, the carpet beneath your feet, the hum of the world. Feel my presence, unchanging and steady. Feel your own presence, the rhythmic beating of your heart, the air in your lungs, your muscles and the way they slide over each other when you move."

Jane's fingers twitched, and her entire body felt overly sensitized when she touched her middle finger to her thumb. It was more than just the feeling of skin on skin, though. She could feel the way she occupied the space in which she stood, could sense the steely constant that was Loki before her.

"Now feel for the unsteady things around you. Search for the shift in the air, the tremble of something that doesn't belong…" His voice lowered to a whisper. "And keep your eyes closed…"

Hidden in the darkness of her closed eyes, Jane couldn't see the lamp flicker or the mercury in the spare barometer she kept around just in case leap. She couldn't see Loki vanish into thin air or reappear five feet in front of her.

She couldn't see any of those things.

But she didn't need to.

Because she felt it.

In the marrow of her bones, the pit of her stomach, the nerves in her skin she felt the trace of magic that signaled the God of Mischief stepping through space and back again. And it wasn't anything she could put words to or even hope to describe, but Jane knew what she felt and what she felt was magic.

"Well?" Loki sounded almost hopeful, cautiously fascinated. "Did you feel it?"

Keeping her eyes closed like he'd instructed, Jane allowed her mouth to split in a wide grin as she breathed her answer. "Yes…" And because she couldn't believe it, could hardly stand it, could barely contain everything she felt, she repeated in a borderline hiss. "Yes."

There was no warning the second time, but she felt the brush of magic all the same when he moved again. "And that time?" His voice came from her left, closer than before.

"Yes…"

"And that time?" His voice came from her right, probably no more than a couple feet away from her shoulder.

"Yes…"

"And that?" His voice came from directly behind her, so close she could feel his breath flutter in her hair, brush against the back of her neck. "Did you feel it that time?"

The last few traces of magic slipped away the longer he stood there, but the memory of it twining with the blood in her veins remained. Exhilarating. Unreal. Fascinating. Words fell short of describing the thrill she felt. But as the excitement decreased, Jane was left very much aware of everything else. That included Loki's presence behind her, something she could sense just as clearly as if she could see him standing there.

"Well, Jane?"
His prompt reminded her that she hadn't answered his last question so she nodded, her whispered answer coming seconds later. "Yes."

Without warning, Jane's hair shifted and Loki's fingers grazed against her shoulder blades as he pulled the locks to drape them over one shoulder. His fingers trailed down, ghosting across her upper arm, skimming down her side, dipping in at her waist. Goosebumps rose in their wake, but it was nothing compared to the way the hair on the back of her neck stood on end when she felt the space between them disappear.

Loki's chest lightly brushed her back, his exhale warm across her cheek as he leaned down to speak directly into her ear. "It's amazing what one can see when they're not looking."

Jane swallowed.

Hard.

The fingers that had lingered at her waist lowered, settled at her hip. They played with the hem of her shirt for a moment before slipping underneath it to trace meandering patterns on the skin revealed there.

"Loki."

It was a warning.

It was a plea.

The hand that wasn't setting the skin over her right hip on fire reached around to curl over her shoulder, the heel of his hand pressing firmly into her collarbone. "Jane." And she felt her name in the motion of his lips against her shoulder.

"We shouldn't be doing this." Jane wasn't sure where she mustered the strength to speak considering her entire being was at war with itself. Her mind was screaming at her to step away, to put an end to the precarious game they were playing even as her feet twisted around to face him as she finally opened her eyes. "We need to stop."

The hand that had been on her shoulder grazed across her cheek before cupping her head and tangling in her hair. "Why?"

So blunt. So nonchalant.

But she really couldn't blame him because it was a very good question to which she didn't have a very good answer.

There was a slight tug on her scalp as Loki encouraged her to let her head fall back. And when she did, his head dipped out of sight and Jane was left staring at the tiled ceiling while his mouth settled on the juncture where her neck met her shoulder.

The contact was too much. His lips were cool against the flush spreading throughout her body, a stark contrast to his warm breath as he moved from one spot to the next, gradually working his way up the long line of her neck. And as Jane breathed a sigh, she couldn't help but think: why not?

Why shouldn't she just give in? Why shouldn't they continue what had been building between them for the past few centuries? Because things had been building, there was no denying. Looking back now, she could see the signs. The subtle shifts in their relationship and the way all of it wound together to bring them to a place where it didn't feel wrong for Loki to be kissing a heated path up
her neck or for her hands to be fisted in the front of his surcoat.

But the line they were walking was a knife's edge, dangerous and risky, and Jane knew that, if they continued, there would be no going back, no way to reverse what they'd done the next morning.

"Because…" Her breath hitched when his lips found the sensitive area on the underside of her jaw. "We just shouldn't."

"I'm not sure whether you're trying to convince me or yourself."

And Jane would've laughed at the irony – because she honestly wasn't sure either – if Loki hadn't captured her mouth at that exact moment.

But while he'd effectively cut off her laugh, there was nothing he could do to prevent the sigh that escaped her.

In a world of constant change, Loki was the only unchanging thing in her life. People came and went, lived and died, but he was always there with his playful smirk and his mysterious secrets and his mischievous ways. And even though the nature of their relationship may have changed over the years, the things that comprised the God of Mischief hadn't. He still felt the same, smelled the same, tasted the same.

The fingers in her hair tightened even as her own trembled. She fleetingly considered releasing the soft leather, lowering her hands, ending their contact, but that thought was abandoned when her right hand moved of its own accord. It released his coat to press flat to the hard armor of his chest, pushed upwards until it could curl around his neck, and she couldn't help but lean into the kiss.

But they were still balancing the knife's edge, so when he ended the kiss, Jane whispered into the half-inch of space between their lips. "Loki…"

It was a last bid at resistance, but it was weak. There was less fight, less willpower. Significantly fewer feelings of *this isn't right* and significantly more thoughts of *please don't stop*.

"You don't want this?"

"I… I'm not…" Jane closed her eyes to shut out the dark intensity of his own and repeated her earlier statement. "We need to stop."

"That's not what I asked." The hand at her hip eased around, slid along the waistband of her shorts, flattened in the small of her back. "There is a vast difference between what a person needs and what a person wants."

With her eyes still closed, she could only feel as Loki shifted away from her mouth, his teeth scraping a harsh path along her jaw and nipping at her earlobe.

"Tell me you don't want this, Jane." For such softly spoken words, they seemed to resound loudly in her mind. Or maybe it was her breathy exhale at the hot, open-mouthed kiss he placed to her neck that sounded loud. "Tell me you don't want me, and I'll stop."

The hand still curved around the back of his neck contracted, fingers curling up to twist in the tips of his hair. It was fascinating how soft the strands were, how easily they slipped against her skin. Even the locks swept back over the crown of his head that were faintly touching the underside of her chin were soft.

"Well?"
As always, he sounded so cocky and self-assured, like he knew exactly how much of a losing battle her mind was waging with her body. So as much as Jane enjoyed the smooth feeling of his hair, she allowed it slide through her fingers in favor of bringing both hands to the lapels of his coat, grasping them firmly, and bringing their mouths together in a crushing kiss.

She pressed him, leaning into him so confidently that he was forced to take a couple steps back until he connected with the wall. There was a momentary feeling of power that rushed through her at the ability to take Loki by surprise… but then he was spinning them around, reversing their positions so she was the one trapped, restrained by the way his body pressed firmly into her.

And it was such a relief to just give in.

With one hand splayed on the wall beside her head, Loki tangled the other in her hair, pressed just enough to tilt her head and deepen the kiss. As his tongue teased hers, Jane's head spun with the heady sensations he so skillfully created. It had been quite a few years since she'd slept with anyone, so when he nudged her legs apart and pushed a knee between them, she all but groaned into his mouth.

It wasn't the first time they'd been close. Every time Loki had transported her through space, he'd done so while she was encircled in his arms.

It wasn't the first time they'd kissed. Just as expected, she could still remember the mind-numbing shock that had overtaken her that first time in Finland. Even more so, she could remember just how natural it had felt to kiss him in Italy.

It wasn't even the first time he'd trapped her up against a wall. Granted, the only other instance was when they were hiding in an alleyway from a pursuing fire giant while one of Russia's finest cities burned around them.

But it was the first time she could hear the growl rumble through his chest, taste the want in his increasingly insistent motions, feel him hard against her thigh.

Jane's hands were restless, flitting between grasping at his lapels, running through his hair, and pulling at his hips before finally pausing in one spot long enough to begin pushing off his coat. She managed to get it over his shoulders but was forced to stop when it caught on his still-raised arms. With considerable effort, she pulled away.

"The coat…" She jerked it for added emphasis. "Take it off."

Loki's hands dropped just long enough for him to shrug out of the surcoat then they were back, slipping beneath her shirt, running scorching paths from her hips to her waist. They paused at her ribcage, fingers fanning out to wrap around her side as one thumb teased the underside of her bra, stroking back and forth. The motion of his thumb was too near and too far away all at the same time. Its repeated path was just close enough to tantalize, just close enough to stoke the liquid heat that was building in the pit of her stomach, but not close enough to give her what she needed.

Breaths coming quicker, Jane leaned forward to capture Loki's mouth only for him to lean away in turn, and she could feel his lips curl in a smirk against her own when she frowned. "It's not nice to tease."

Any more protests were cut off, though, when the marginal space between them vanished. He reclaimed her mouth as his body trapped her once more against the wall. And while her hands absently searched for an opening in his clothing, his hands slid down, hooked around the backs of her thighs, and lifted her up. Jane sighed at the contact, the way his hips pressed intimately,
firmly, deliciously against her, and heard the soft groan in the back of Loki's throat as he rocked into her.

Without warning, the wall disappeared from her back, and her legs automatically tightened around him. There was little need to support herself, though, not when the arms wrapped around her lower back held her so effortlessly. Only when the world tilted and Jane felt them lower did she end the kiss and open her eyes to find they'd relocated to the couch where she now sat straddling Loki's lap.

Everything felt so surreal.

Hundreds of years of tense encounters and awkward conversations and halting revelations were suddenly unimportant, forgotten, cast aside in favor of focusing on the here and now. In the past, things between them had been black and white with the lines clearly drawn – Jane, the human struggling with immortality; Loki, the immortal playing god with her life – but the present was grey.

No, not even grey.

It was multi-hued, brilliantly rich and vibrant, with the lines between them all but dissolved. Because there was nothing immortal about the way Jane pulled at his clothes like she was running out of time. Just like there was nothing god-like about the way Loki growled against her mouth, hips bucking beneath her when she nipped at his lower lip.

There were so few lines and so many colors – burnished silver was the rough fibers of the couch against her knees and shins; slate blue was the whisper of fabric against her skin as he pulled off her shirt; dusky purple was the hungry look in his eyes; blood red was the open-mouthed kiss he placed at the hollow of her throat; sunset orange was the press of fingers up her spine before they unclasped her bra; sage green was the breathy exhale that escaped her as she carded her fingers through his hair – and they all swirled together in a dizzying kaleidoscope as her head fell back.

It would be a bald-faced lie if Jane said she'd never imagined herself in this position with Loki. In the middle of the night, when the dark and hidden things in her mind came forward to play, she'd recall how it felt to touch him, to kiss him. She'd recall the dark look in his eyes and the slight hesitance before he'd release her after their travels through space. But thoughts could only take a person so far because no imagining could truly replicate the way his hands felt in her hair as he pulled her mouth back to his or the exact way his lips moved against hers or what it felt like for his fingers to ghost along her back, over her breasts, and down to the front of her shorts.

Jane had been half-heartedly pulling at Loki's clothing for a while, but when the button of her shorts slipped free, she leaned back with a curse. "Damn it, how do you get all this off?"

Any other time she would've laughed at his bemused expression, the way his brows pulled together as he struggled to comprehend what she meant through the haze of lust, but considering she was topless, sitting on his lap, and could feel him pressed against where she ached for him, she just leveled him with a frustrated glare. To Loki's credit, however, he recovered quickly, offering her a brief smirk before holding her still with a hand on her back.

"Always so impatient." He kissed a torturously slow path down the valley between her breasts. "Good things come to those who—"

The words hitched and his eyes shot to hers when she tilted her hips just enough to grind against him. "To hell with patience and waiting. How do you get it off?"

Jane didn't receive an answer, though. There was only the subtle tensing of his muscles beneath her before the world spun and she found herself lying on her back with Loki hovering above her. After a
searing kiss, he sat up until he was kneeling between her legs.

"I can count on one hand the number of people I would allow to be so bold with me."

It was ironic that all of that said confidence melted away when his fingers crept under the waistband of her shorts. Still, Jane obediently lifted her hips when he began to ease them down.

"None of whom are ones with which I'd ever share a bed."

Loki guided her legs until they were extended upwards in front of him and slid her shorts off. When she tried to lower them, though, his hands settled on either side of her thighs and led them until her ankles rested on his shoulders.

"So what is it about you?"

The tips of his hair, mussed from her fingers running through it so many times, tickled against one ankle as he turned to press a kiss to the other. Then he slowly made his way from ankle to calf, from calf to knee, from knee to thigh, and while he drew steadily closer to the apex of her thighs, he continued to murmur against her skin.

"Why do I allow you to talk to me the way you do?"

Another couple kisses.

"Why can't I just leave you be as I intended from the beginning?"

Another couple inches.

"Why are the lines between what I should do and what I want to do so blurred when it comes to you?" Another couple kisses, another couple inches, and then Loki was so close – *so god damn close* – that Jane had to remind herself how to breathe. The hands that had been trailing down the backs of her thighs slipped beneath her, lifting her hips just enough for him to press his lips to the point where her leg connected to the rest of her body. "And why don't I even care?"

"Loki…"

Hands curled tightly around the edge of the couch cushion, his name fell from her mouth without her even realizing it, and at the sound, he pulled away just enough to rest a cheek against the inside of her thigh and meet her gaze.

"When did everything become so complicated?"

Lost in the grey-green sea that was his eyes, Jane reached down to run her thumb along his cheekbone. "When you saved my life in Norway. Since the beginning, things have been complicated." Her brows knitted at the torn, almost lost, expression that stole across his face. "Do you regret it?"

"No." There was absolutely no hesitation in his reply, and she knew he was telling the truth, could sense the bittersweet honesty in his words. "Even if I probably should."

When Loki looked down, pressed another kiss to the juncture of her thigh, and stood in quick succession, Jane was left staring up at him in a mixture of shock and confusion, wondering if he was disgusted with himself for what he'd admitted. The confusion didn't last for long, though. Leaning down, he touched a single fingertip to her sternum and proceeded to drag it down the entirety of her body, between her breasts and over her navel before hooking it around the elastic in her underwear.
A flush spread through Jane's neck, cheeks, and ears unbidden as the last piece of clothing slipped free from around her foot. Even after several centuries and numerous lovers, she'd never been able to throw the initial disquiet she always felt when naked before a man for the first time.

It was even more nerve-wracking when the man in question was still fully clothed while she was not.

It was even more nerve-wracking when the man in question was Loki.

He stared down at her, eyes roaming the expanse of her body. One set of fingers followed in the wake of his eyes, trailing up her shin, around the curve of her hip, into the dip of her waist... and when they paused to linger at her breast, Jane closed her eyes, unable to watch his silent perusal anymore.

"I think this situation is unfairly skewed." The words came out a little breathier than expected, but that was largely attributed to her racing heart as his fingers traced lazy circles around one hardened peak and then the other. "Either I'm wearing far too little or you're wearing far too much."

He chuckled. "Am I, now?"

Then the couch dipped as he lowered himself onto her, and the sensation of skin on skin nearly left her gasping. It was magic, that was the only explanation for the sudden disappearance of his clothes, but Jane wasn't complaining in the slightest. Her hands that had still been gripping the cushion came up to wrap around him, fingertips tracing the contours of his back, nails digging into the hard muscles.

Loki studied her face for what seemed like the longest time, intense and focused. But when she shifted beneath him, easing one leg out so he could rest between them, the intimate position broke whatever had captivated him so thoroughly, and he blinked, came back to himself, and captured her lips with a growl.

The leisurely pace from before was gone, replaced by an intensity apparent in the hand that shoved her knee to the side, in the fingers that crept between their bodies to press against her. And as his thumb circled the bundle of nerves and left her gasping into his mouth, Jane could feel his hips jerk and rut against her thigh.

If the flush that had stained her face and neck had been bad, it was nothing compared to the way that liquid fire from before now spread throughout her body. Her nerves felt hyper-sensitive, alive with the effects of his ministrations, and the longer he plundered her mouth, the higher he brought her with his continued caress, the more spots began to flash through her sight as her brain went white and fuzzy at the edges.

But just when a release to the tension was imminent, his fingers stilled.

Left dangling on the cliff's edge, Jane would've cursed Loki if not for the way he began to carefully reposition himself. Without breaking the kiss, he nudged her other leg aside to settle between them, leaned on one elbow to run one hand from her hip all the way up until it cupped her face.

She could feel him – every last inch of him – brushing against her in an electrifying caress, but he held still, pulling back to rest his forehead against hers.

"Jane..."

Despite it being only a whisper, the unspoken question was heavy in the air. But words wouldn't
form in Jane's mouth, so the only thing she could do was breathlessly nod and wind her legs around his hips, tightening just a bit to encourage him.

And things were no longer tentative between them, no longer perhaps.

There was only yes and please and now and…

Loki pressed in, filled the emptiness with himself, and when he was finally seated within her, he buried his face in the curve of her neck. There was one timeless moment where they were still, the silence punctuated only by the sound of strained breathing. But then he was moving, rotating his hips against her, withdrawing almost completely before pressing back in, sending white-hot blades of pleasure shooting through her with every thrust.

Drowning in the sensations, Jane didn't register the fingers creeping up her arm until they wound through her own and pressed them into the cushion beside her head. Loki's grip was firm, almost painfully so, but the pleasure chased away any discomfort.

She could feel his jagged pants against her neck, smell the salt on his sweat-slick skin, taste the magic ingrained in his very being when she pressed her lips to his shoulder, and when he angled himself to graze over just the right spot within her, she could hear the keening sound she emitted and the low groan of her name he issued in response.

Fingers still clasped, they moved together, Loki murmuring increasingly desperate and indistinct phrases into her neck while her body blazed, back arched, toes curled, and Jane distantly thought that if this was what it felt like to be consumed by fire, she would gladly burn.

It was all so much.

Too much.

And yet, not enough.

Just when she thought the pressure was too much to endure, when she thought she would burn or drown or die with the intensity of it, the world snapped, sent her reeling and tumbling and falling as her body rippled with a pleasure so intense it was almost pain.

Jane clung tightly to Loki as he chased his own release. Lifting his head, he briefly covered her mouth with his own, but all attempts at control were in vain. The steady rhythm he'd maintained was shattered, regressing into hasty movements as he thrust one, two, three times before finishing.

Slowly, the world drifted back into focus.

The comforting weight of Loki's body lessened as he rolled to the side, rearranging them until he lay on his back with her head pillowed on his shoulder, body tucked to his side. She was still trembling, sparking with the aftershocks, but the fingers lazily stroking up and down her spine eased her into boneless relaxation.

With relaxation, though, came the reality of what they'd done. Jane experienced one heart-stopping thought of what now? before deciding it best to just not think about it. Tomorrow she could analyze the details and break down the particulars of what would happen going forward. Tomorrow she might even regret what had happened. But tonight… tonight she would just let things be.

Swaths of moonlight shone through the blinds, and she absentmindedly traced the patterns they threw across Loki's bare chest. "Did you ever think things would come to this point when you gave me that apple?"
"No." His soft exhale ruffled her hair. "Many Asgardians have carried on affairs with Midgardian women throughout the years, but I have never been one of them."

"Why me, then?"

The fingers against her back faltered and fell still. "You're not like the rest of them. Not anymore. Time tends to have that effect on a person."

"There are plenty of women who are different. Maybe not in the same way, but still..." Jane tilted her head back until she could meet his eyes. "That can't be the only reason."

Loki's focus flicked between her eyes for a moment before he issued a deep sigh. "There are very few things in any of the realms that I can say are completely my own. But you, Jane... you are all mine."

The ages had shaped and molded Jane into her own person. She was confident, strong, and resourceful, had survived wars and cheated death more than once. But at the same time, it was only the two of them who had watched all those years pass. Jane didn't know how things were for Asgardians or Gods of Mischief, but for humans, that kind of companionship, no matter how awkward or halting it might have been at times, created a bond. It was a bond that transcended magic and science, secrets and realms, gods and humans.

And so instead of refuting Loki's statement, she freely allowed him to snag her lips in another kiss.

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – Ceylon, Jane's residence for this chapter, is current day Sri Lanka. Also, the elderly man Jane remembers when she comments how magic is only something science hasn't been able to explain yet is meant to be Arthur C. Clarke. At this point, he'd only released the first of his three laws of prediction, but it's not a stretch to assume that Jane's comment might have helped shape what would become his third and most well-known law that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. I'm sure you all remember a similar line from the first Thor movie, as well.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
1989: The German Democratic Republic

Chapter Notes

Not a lot to say to start this off other than thank you to everyone that's enjoyed this story so far! Your support and interest feeds my muse and motivation. I appreciate it more than you know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twelve

“You wear nothing, but you wear it so well – tied up and twisted the way I’d like to be.”

1989: The German Democratic Republic

Jane scooped what remained of the chicken from dinner into a small container, placed it on the counter beside the other two, and tossed the utensils into the sink. Turning around, she surveyed the sparse flat. The space sported the necessities – appliances, running water, beds – but that was about it. There were very few of the materialistic comforts that made a house feel like a home.

“I get paid tomorrow.” The comment broke through Jane’s focus, and she glanced up to the woman who had come to stand beside her. “Maybe we’ll be able to find a new table.”

“You know money’s not the issue, Katja.”

In her earlier years, the world had operated on a system of trading – one good or service bartered for another – but for the majority of her immortal life, money had run the world. If a person had the money and wanted something, it was theirs. That mindset eventually led to people wasting their entire lives in the pursuit of things. Everyone was trying to keep up with the Joneses. Here, however, it was pointless to spend your life pursuing material gain because, no matter how much money you amassed, there was little to spend it on.

Such was life in the GDR.

It was a new experience to be sure, although not an entirely unwelcome one. Without the same worries, people had the mental capacity to focus on what really mattered. Relaxing with friends and family, going for bike rides, mushrooming in the woods… there was a simplicity to be found that reminded Jane of her younger days in Norway.

“I know, I guess I was just being…” Katja trailed off.

With a faint smile, Jane nudged the woman’s shoulder with her own. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure something out. We always do.”
"I’m so tired of having to figure things out, though. We’re always just trying to make do."

The irritated growl she issued as she turned away and busied herself wiping down the stove made Jane’s heart ache. Born in the years after World War II had ended, Katja was innocent. She didn’t deserve the sometimes harsh living conditions of the GDR or the constant harassment from the Stasi. But someone had to pay the price. History would show children to be the ones punished for the sins of their parents, and so Katja was just one of many children forced to bear the weight of her ancestors’ mistakes.

"Things will be alright. They can't keep this up forever." That, at least, she knew for sure. If one thousand years had taught her anything, it was that nothing lasted forever. Regimes rose and fell on a regular basis, and the current one would be no different. “And it’s not as if you really need a new table.”

The upbeat attempt at reassurance earned Jane a mocking look. “I’m pretty sure ours will collapse if you so much as breathe on it too hard.”

“Katja—”

"Let’s just talk about something else. I hate thinking about this."

Life in the GDR might be simpler, yes, but for the young Katja who wanted nothing more than to share in the same experiences as the rest of the world, to have the freedom to come and go as she pleased… well, it would never be enough. More than anything, Jane wanted to find the right thing to say, the one thing that would help her friend feel better. Watching Katja’s blonde hair sway as she continued to vigorously scrub the now-spotless stove, though, she recognized that the best thing right then would be to drop the subject.

"Okay." After one last sideways glance, she dipped her hands into the sudsy water and began to wash the dishes. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Whatever happened to the guy you were seeing?"

The glass slipped from Jane’s hands. "What guy?" She chuckled in an attempt to smooth the clumsy action, but it came out more nervous than flippant.

"The one you were sneaking around with a few months back."

Self-assurance was laced so thickly through Katja’s voice that Jane didn’t even need to look at her to know the woman was grinning. She kept her eyes lowered, resolutely stared as the dishrag made pass after pass across the skillet, and tried not to groan in frustration. When she'd agreed to a change in topic, she didn’t mean for it to shift to her personal life.

"I haven't been sneaking around with anyone."

"Oh, please…” Katja snorted. "I may be disillusioned, but I'm not blind. For the past four years, you and I have spent all our free evenings together. All of them. Then, out of the blue, you start spending days at a time by yourself where you barely leave the house."

"I told you I wasn't feeling well."

"That often?"

"Some people are more prone to getting sick than others."
"Every other month for the past year?"

"It hasn't been every other month."

"You're right, it's been more like every six or so weeks." With a huff, Jane allowed the dishes to fall back into the water and fixed Katja with an exasperated look. Her friend, however, wasn't deterred in the least, just leaned against the counter on the opposite side of the kitchen, arms crossed, lips quirking, brows raised in a skeptical expression. "Most people don't have such a healthy and contented glow after being ill or bed-ridden for that long."

Jane turned back to the sink. "I always wait a little while to make sure I'm not contagious before I let you come back over. There's no point in both of us getting sick. Anyway, maybe I enjoy having some time to myself every now and then."

"And maybe I enjoy eating gruel every day at the factory." Just the thought of the lumpy, grey concoction made Jane's lip curl. "Nope, it's a guy."

"If that's what you want to think, Katja, by all means…"

It wasn't that she was outright lying. Not completely. There had been the rare occasion she'd been genuinely sick and needed some time alone to recover. But the others… memories of breathless sighs and twisted sheets and alabaster skin welled up unbidden, some of them so strong she could almost feel his fingers carding through her hair, ghosting down her side, digging in at her hips, could almost taste the spark on his tongue, a signature trace of the magic ingrained in his very being.

"Is it the same guy from last year?"

It took a moment for the visions to fade enough for her to refocus on the woman staring at her expectantly. "Who?"

"You know…" Katja gestured indistinctly. "Tall, dark hair, a little pale. He had the most gorgeous eyes, and I remember telling you after he left that if someone ever looked at me the way he did at you, I'd probably go weak at the knees."

For only having met one time, Loki had clearly made a lasting impression. Introducing him to people was something Jane tried to avoid, though. Even if his visits were more frequent than they'd been in the past, they were still too far apart for him to be labeled a permanent fixture in her fabricated life. In the end, she was forced to create explanations for his sporadic presence. A distant cousin, a childhood friend that lived in a town nearby, a part-time lover kept on the side… false stories of his identity intertwined with false stories of her own.

A story within a story.

The two of them were the realm's greatest lie.

Looking away, Jane perused the rest of the kitchen and, not for the first time, fervently hoped Loki wasn't lurking somewhere unseen. The last thing he needed was to hear Katja's compliments. His ego was large enough already.

"For someone so apparently disillusioned, you're quite the romantic." Jane mumbled the comment, more intent on searching for any telltale glimpse of magic than the conversation at hand. It didn't matter, though, not when she was smoothly ignored.

"I haven't seen him around here since then…" Katja's wide grin entered her line of sight, cutting off the kitchen. "But you can't deny there was something between you two."
Saying there was something between them was putting it lightly. *Something* was nearly a millennium of interactions, the magnetic push and pull of their relationship, the gradual transition from acquaintance to friend to lover. It was the way his mouth always curled around a mysterious smirk and the feeling in the pit of her stomach when he appeared that she told herself was only magic.

Something between the two of them…

If only Katja knew the half of it.

Jane turned back to the sink and resumed her cleaning. "Yes, actually, I can."

"Come on, Carolin, I saw the way you were smiling at him. You had it bad." The dishes containing the leftovers disappeared as Katja meandered back to the refrigerator. "The question is: do you still?"

"Do I still what?"

"Have it bad for that guy?" Their eyes met briefly before separating once more. "He's the one, isn't he? The one you've been trying to hide? Come on, you know I won't breathe a word to anyone. You can tell me."

It was something Jane had never been able to understand, the constant need people felt to dig for the details of her life. Starting in Scotland, everyone seemed to make it their personal responsibility to find her a husband, be her husband, or reprimand her for not being interested in searching for a husband. Very few were content to just leave her be.

"I'm just curious considering that's the only time I've seen him. I promise I won't ask any other questions if you answer just that one…"

Silence crept between them, only broken by the sloshing dishwater and what sounded like a tapping foot. Both stubborn to a fault, they remained there, locked in a battle of wills as the clock ticked away the seconds, bleeding first into one and then two minutes.

It wasn't that Jane didn't know how to answer. It was more that giving voice to how she felt always seemed to make everything that much more real. She couldn't deny how at ease they'd become around each other in the past few years, just like she couldn't deny the smile that crept across her face whenever he arrived. But brushing aside personal feelings in favor of living in the moment was a useful trick she'd discovered early on.

Through the blinds, the sky was still dim with only the first hints of dawn. Not even the birds had begun to sing yet. Jane's mind, however, was a flurry of activity as she bolted upright on the couch. With quick breaths and a racing heart, she stared down at Loki in a semi-panic. Despite her sudden movement, he appeared to be asleep, and she took a moment to scan his form… the relaxed face, the contoured chest she'd just been nestled up to, the muscles above his hipbones that led to a thin trail of hair that disappeared beneath the blanket.

With another jerking movement, she looked away and carefully gathered a section of the blanket to her chest. If the God of Mischief beside her and the persistent soreness she felt weren't enough to remind her exactly what had transpired the night before, the pile of clothes on the floor was. Details rushing back, Jane haphazardly ran a hand through her hair, and she was just contemplating slipping out from under the cover when cool fingers teased lightly across her lower back.

"Lie down." When she turned back, Loki's eyes were still closed, but there was a slight curl to his lips that hadn't been there before. "It's still early."

"But we… last night we…" She took a deep breath, tried to organize the chaos in her mind into clear
thoughts. "Don't you think we need to talk about this?"

At that, his eyes cracked open, pupils dark even in the darkness of the room. "What is there to discuss?"

"Umm... all of this." She gestured between them, but Loki only arched an eyebrow. The growing smirk on his face spoke volumes, though. He was amused by her obvious embarrassment. Sighing deeply, she clarified. "What happens now?"

"Why do you feel the need to scrutinize everything instead of simply accepting what's happened?"

"Because everything's different now." The traces of panic she'd felt earlier began to wind their way through her veins once more. "This wasn't just you protecting me or saving my life. This was... it was..."

Loki nonchalantly finished the thought. "Sex."

"Yes. Sex." Jane mentally cringed. How ridiculous that she could carry on a number of affairs throughout the years without issue but end up completely tongue-tied in front of the one person she most wished she wouldn't. "That means the whole dynamic we've managed to create over the past nine hundred years has changed."

"Why?"

Blinking rapidly, she tried and failed to follow his train of thought. "What do you mean why?" She also tried and failed to move away, his hand tightening just enough on her hip to hold her firmly in place.

"Why does anything have to change?"

Her mouth slipped open, but the only thing that came out was a startled squeak when Loki sat up and effortlessly lifted, turned, and lowered her until she straddled his lap. Struggling to ignore the erection now pressed firmly against her, Jane reached for the blanket that had been yanked from her fingers. But when she shifted to pull it free from around her leg, he caught her hands.

"You wish to know what happens now, Jane?" Immediately, her eyes snapped to his. "Either you will push me away, stand up, get dressed, and convince yourself this was a mistake and that it will never happen again..." Then her eyes closed as he leaned forward to press a kiss to the side of her neck, the feeling of his lips against the sensitive spot beneath her ear sending a shiver down her spine. "Or you will lie back down with me, decide not to overanalyze what's happened, and allow yourself to let go."

For one brief moment, Jane could see it. Staring into the intense grey-green sea of Loki's eyes, she could see herself pull her hands free of the fingers clasped loosely now around her wrists and stand up, leave Loki sitting there on the couch alone as she disappeared into her bathroom and closed the door.

But when she ended up pulling her hands out of his, it was only to wind them around his neck, one set of fingers tugging his head back so she could claim his mouth, taste the magic on his tongue, feel the fire curl low in her core.

And she didn't even fight it when he flipped them over, settled between her legs, and sent her mind spiraling out of control to settle somewhere amidst the stars.

In the end, it was easier to not dwell too much on the details. Instead, she focused on the expert way
he ministered to her, the hard press of his fingers across her body, the way they moved in sync together. What they had was smooth on the surface. Underneath however, things remained complicated because there were still secrets and unanswered questions. There were still things that went undiscussed, ignored in favor of reaching for each other, but that didn't change the fact that they remained, simmering beneath the façade.

There was also the fact that, even though Jane was immortal, she was still very much human, and part of being human meant that, despite her efforts, she wasn't always able to leave emotions out of the mix. It was easy to say what she felt was only a post-coital glow, but it became harder to disregard the more she caught herself studying the way the corners of his eyes crinkled when he laughed, observing the soft lines of his face while he slept, relishing the nearly broken way he groaned her name every time he entered her.

"You do realize you've been cleaning the same pan for the past five minutes, right? You're going to scrub the finish right off if you don't stop thinking of ways to get out of answering."

Jane paused, refocused on the now spotless skillet, and realizing her friend was right, frowned. With a sigh, she dumped the gleamingly-clean pan into the other side of the sink and proceeded to rinse it off.

"Why are you so interested in my love life?"

"The supposed lack thereof, for one." After dumping a spoon rest into the water, Katja lingered. "Also, you've done so much to take care of me that I just want you to be happy, and I saw the way you looked at him. I think he makes you happy."

Their conversation was skirting dangerous territory, that subject she didn't want to voice, tried to overlook, but Katja wasn't going to give up until she received an answer of some kind, so it was with an exaggerated huff that Jane looked to her.

"Yes, I've been seeing a guy."

Katja's excitement was tangible. "Every time you were sick?" Air quotes accompanied her emphasis.

"Almost every time I was sick. Some of those were real." But Jane might as well have been talking to a wall for as much as the correction was heard.

"I knew it!" Flouncing back to the refrigerator, Katja wrenched the door open and strategically stacked a few of the leftover dishes before peeking over her shoulder. "And it's the same one, right?"

Unwilling to let her friend continue on the same tangent for fear of getting too deep, Jane shook her head and began to wash the spoon rest. "I believe you said I only had to answer one question, and I've answered two now. You're not getting any more details."

"Carolin!"

The whining plea was expected.

The resounding crash that sounded from outside was not.

Jane jumped at the sudden noise, the dishrag in her hands falling into the soapy water as she looked to Katja who was still bent over in front of the refrigerator. Seeing how her face was twisted in a grimace as she massaged her head, Jane wasn't the only one who had been startled.

"What the hell was that?"
"No idea…" Katja glared at the top of the refrigerator. "But whatever it was owes me a painkiller."

Wiping her hands on her pants, Jane ignored the mumbled string of curses coming from the opposite side of the room and pulled back the curtains just enough to peek out. Simpler life or not, caution was still prudent to avoid dealings with the Stasi. At the sight, though, she abandoned subtlety and stared outright.

"Katja, there are people outside."

One dark figure after another passed beneath the glow of the streetlight. "Well, they're a bunch of fools looking to get shot then. It's well past curfew." The refrigerator door closed a little harder than necessary, a parting act of vengeance from the disgruntled woman.

"No, I mean there are a bunch of people." Jane leaned right and then left, looking from one end of the block to the other. "They're everywhere. The street's full of them."

"Wait, what?"

It wasn't uncommon for there to be stragglers around town after curfew. However, whether in the daytime or at night, it was uncommon for that many people to be marching through the streets so boldly, with such purpose.

There was the quiet sound of Katja crossing the room, then their arms pressed together as they both stared out the window. "What are they doing?"

"I don't know." Jane shook her head. "But I'm sure this isn't going to end well."

The rest of the food sat forgotten on the countertop, as did the dirty dishes in the sink. And they were still watching the steady movement of people when a glint caught their attention, yellowed streetlight on well-worn steel.

"Is that a…"

"Yeah." *Pickaxe* wouldn't quite take form around the lump in Jane's throat, but they both recognized the weapon nonetheless. "It is."

If the crowd massing in the streets after curfew hadn't been enough to make an apprehensive knot tighten in her stomach, the sight of a weapon was. No one brought a pickaxe – a few more flashes caught Jane's eye – or a hatchet or a knife to a riot unless they anticipated a fight. Beside her, Katja's mouth fell open as people flooded the street, but whatever she might have said was cut off by a yell from the other side of the flat.

"Katja! Carolin! Come here, quick! You have to see this!"

The urgency in the voice made Jane even more nervous. She shot Katja a wary look, wiped her hands on the dishtowel, and followed the other woman through a swinging door. A few steps into the adjoining room, they stopped, giving their eyes time to adjust to the dimly lit space.

Not one of the various lamps was on. The only source of illumination came from the television, its muted light coating the room in an eerie blue and throwing the already dark corners into even deeper shadows. Eventually, Jane was able to pick out the figure crouched on the rug, attention rapt on whatever played on the television in front of him.

"Honestly, Dieter, there are more important things going on right now than a television program. If this is another one of those recapping broadcasts…" Katja trailed off, leaving the open-ended threat
It wasn't the first time Jane had heard the woman issue a warning, but all three of them knew just how empty the threat was. The worst Katja had ever done was bump her fiancé's head with a rolled-up newspaper. In all honesty, that was probably the worst she'd ever do. Still, neither of the women enjoyed listening to the evening reports that covered those who had been killed trying to escape. 

"It's about the wall."

Jane crossed her arms but took a few steps closer to where Dieter knelt on the floor. "It always is."

"No, there's been an announcement." Crawling forward on his hands and knees, he turned up the volume. "Listen."

From the speakers came the muffled sound of papers shuffling, camera equipment being moved, and the hushed whispering of a reporter. Obligingly, Jane and Katja moved to flank either side of Dieter, taking in the newsroom displayed on the screen. Row after row of occupied seats that extended in front of the camera disappeared as it zoomed in to one of the men seated at the head table.

"Schabowski's the one making the—"

"Shh!"

There was a high probability of Katja fixing Jane and Dieter with a glare at their combined hush, but Jane was too intent on watching the broadcast to care. The video pitched slightly as the cameraman readjusted but then held still on the face of Günter Schabowski, the First Secretary of the GDR.

"Therefore, we have decided to introduce a bill today which allows every citizen to travel out of East Germany by way of the border crossing points."

Jane's mouth fell open. "What?" Not long after, a hand snagged her arm, fingers curling directly above her elbow. Katja's grip was bruising, but Jane didn't brush away her hold. She knew what the announcement meant to the other woman.

From some point off-screen, another voice called out. "When does it come into force?"

"As far as I am aware, immediately. " Secretary Schabowski looked down and flipped through a few papers before him. "Straight away."

Animated murmuring immediately filled the newsroom but was cut off as the footage ended and the newscaster returned to the screen. The man turned to the other two people sitting at the anchor desk and started up a discussion on the ramifications of the announcement, but the guests' responses were lost when Dieter spoke up.

"They've been showing it on repeat for the past fifteen minutes." Without taking his eyes off the broadcast, he waved indistinctly to the front door. "I was over at Erich's place when it first came on. I came back as soon as I could."

"You should have called us in here right away." Katja smacked the back of Dieter's shoulder with her free hand. Then she pulled Jane to face her with the other. "Do you know what this means, Carolin?"

"It explains all the people in the streets."

"It means I'll be able to go home." Katja’s face split wide in an impossibly wide grin. "I'll be reunited
with my parents again."

Twenty-eight years had passed since the Berlin Wall had been built to prevent emigration from socialist East Germany to the supposedly fascist West Germany. Almost overnight, it had been erected, and the guards that had immediately been stationed prevented any freedom of movement. No one was able to cross the border, not even a four year old Katja who had spent the night with her aunt and uncle.

As the years passed, the wall had been rebuilt and refortified while the hopes of the people were simultaneously crushed. Between the guard towers and the death strip, to try and escape was a death sentence. People could come in, but they couldn't leave. Although, if the border guards had known Jane wanted to enter so she could bring some small measure of hope to a populace trapped in their own city, they probably wouldn't have allowed her entry.

Overlooking his fiancée's rambling, Dieter finally tore his gaze from the television to glance up at Jane. "What people in the streets?"

"They're everywhere out there, a lot of them carrying axes and hatchets." She nodded towards the window and the crowd still moving past it. "I don't know if they're planning on tearing apart any guards left at the wall or the wall itself."

Before she'd even finished speaking, Dieter was on his feet. Both of the women stared as he crossed to the front door and shrugged on his coat.

"What do you think you're—"

"I can't wait around here if everyone else is going down to the wall." He ignored Katja's sputtering questions just as he'd ignored her rambling. "The two of you should stay here, though. If things go south, I don't want either of you getting hurt."

And as quickly as he'd stood, he was out the door, joining the mass of people, jogging down the street. He hadn't even waited to gauge their reactions to his insistence that they stay put. If he had, he might not have been so quick to leave because Katja was literally fuming.

"Like hell if he thinks I'm going to wait here while he gets himself killed." Jane watched the headstrong woman follow Dieter's footsteps, striding to the door and snagging her coat. After securing the clasps, she turned and held out a second coat. "Are you coming?"

There was only a split-second of hesitation before Jane crossed the room as well. Like Katja and Dieter and almost everyone living in East Germany, her coat was threadbare and covered with worn holes, but it kept the worst of the chill at bay as they exited the house and began to follow the steady stream of people.

The closer they got to the wall, the thicker the crowd grew, increasing to the point where they could barely take a step without bumping into someone. The effect was claustrophobic, but the situation ahead was more important than personal space. Even a misstep from the man next to Jane that sent her careening into Katja wasn't enough to deter them.

Straightening, she shot a glare to the oblivious man before releasing the fistfuls of her friend's coat, the only thing that had prevented her from falling. "Sorry."

"It's fine." The muttered words were barely audible, swept away in the slight breeze when Katja looked the opposite way. "Not like you could help it."

Jane was still sending intermittent glares when they slowed to a stop. It took a moment for the distant
shouting to register between the jumbled conversations of the observers around them, but when it
did, she stood on her tiptoes. Craneing her neck, she tried to catch a glimpse of whatever action was
occurring at the wall.

"Can you see anything?" Katja was quite a bit shorter even than Jane and could only depend on the
four and a half inches that separated their heights for information.

"Not much." She leaned back and forth to see around a woman's waving hands, a raised hatchet, and
the mammoth of a man that edged in front of them. "I think I see Dieter, though. Straight ahead, a
little to the left." Dropping back down, she scanned the gaps in the line of people. "We could try to
squeeze through?"

Pursing her lips, Katja eyed the widest of the openings. "I don't know, we might get separated."

"Then you go on ahead and find out what they're doing." Jane nodded towards the growing
commotion at the wall. "I'll wait for you on the outskirts of the crowd."

"And leave you by yourself? I think not." There was a stubborness in her friend's narrowed eyes
and the downward tilt of the corners of her mouth that was all too familiar.

"I'll be at the far edge of everything. What could possibly happen to me?"

Hands settling on her hips, Katja adopted the same sarcastic tone Jane had just used. "Berlin's in the
middle of a riot. I can think of a hundred things that could happen to you if things started to go
poorly, none of them good."

"Don't be silly." Rolling her eyes, she tried to steer Katja forward. "I'll be fine. Just go."

However, the woman planted her feet, refusing to be moved. "You don't know that you'll be alright."

"Actually, I do."

"Oh, really?" A riot in Berlin was nothing compared to the French Revolution or World War II, but
since no one was aware of her involvement in either of those, Jane had to settle for lowering her arms
and biting back a sigh at her friend's obstinacy. "And how, exactly do you know that?"

"Because I'll keep her safe."

It was the unexpected interject that finally pushed Katja into silence, but it was the familiar voice in
which it was said that made the words on the tip of Jane's tongue disappear. On cue, both of them
turned, and out of the corner of her eye, Jane noticed Katja's mouth fall open.

She couldn't say she was surprised to see Loki – his increased appearances had conditioned her to
the idea of him showing up at any time – but she doubted she'd ever get used to the sight of him in
clothes suited to her realm. Dark jeans and a sweater didn't suit him as well as his Asgardian armor,
yet he always managed to look impeccable.

"It's him! I knew he was the one you were seeing!"

Loki's gaze remained fixed on hers, but he quirked an eyebrow and smirked a bit at Katja's
exclamation. "She knows about us?"

Lips tightening into a thin line, Jane mumbled. "She does now."

"You're exactly like I remembered. I can see why Carolin keeps you all to herself. Hard to believe
I’ve never seen you around here, though.” The woman raised her voice to be heard over the increasing sound of the crowd and smiled. "I'm Katja, by the way. We weren't properly introduced last time. What did you say your name was?"

Before Loki could respond, Jane squeezed between them, garnering Katja's focus. "His name is Johann, and we're going to leave now."

Immediately, her face fell. "Leave? But what about… you don't want to figure out what's happening?"

"They're dismantling the wall."

"What?" Katja whirled around just as Jane rose up onto her tiptoes, using Loki's shoulder to steady herself as she tried to see the action for herself. She still couldn't see much, but she could see just enough to spot Dieter in the crowd again.

Lowering, she leaned forward to speak directly into Katja's ear. "Dieter's still up there. You go and find him. I'm going to head home with Johann. I promise everything's going to be fine." She gave her a tiny push. "Go on."

There was a slight moment of hesitation, but then Katja was nodding and slinking between the huge man and another woman in the general direction of her fiancé. And as she disappeared into the throng, Jane felt Loki's fingers close around her wrist and lead her back through the fray.

It took a while for them to get to a point where they weren't completely surrounded by people, and even then, they kept walking for a while, only stopping when they reached a building some fifty feet away from the commotion. People continued to pass them occasionally but never spared either of them a glance. The entirety of Berlin was focused on the wall.

Loki leaned back against the building, casually crossing his arms. "You didn't want to help them?"

"No…” Still facing the scene, Jane walked backwards until she too was leaning against the building. "These people have been essentially held captive in their own country for the past thirty years. They have more right to tear down the wall than I do."

Pickaxes and hatchets glinted in the distance, sparks flying when they connected with the concrete. And as the gashes in the wall grew larger, people began to clamber onto it, standing on top of what had been a symbol of their suppression for so long and lifting their fists in triumph.

"Are you going to take part in their celebrations?"

"Probably not." A small smile pulled at her mouth. "I'll just go home and look forward to the cheeseburgers I'll be able to finally eat when I move."

Without looking away from the line of people now on top of the wall, Jane noticed Loki’s head turn towards her. "I offered to take you elsewhere multiple times."

"I know."

And she'd seriously considered his proposal on more than one occasion. In the end, though, she'd always decided she couldn't leave Katja and Dieter. They had needed someone to tell them stories of better places.

"So your only plans for the evening are to stay home?" At her nod, Loki turned to face her, one shoulder braced against the wall. "Perhaps I can accompany you."
Jane shot him a skeptical look. "Is this you asking for permission?"

"Pretense." The shoulder not pressed to the building rose and fell in an indifferent shrug, but then he rotated to his prior position, back against the wall. Even looking at his profile, though, she didn't miss the smirk that crawled across his mouth. "I know from experience you like to feel you have a say in the matter."

"How charming." Pushing away from the wall, she moved in front of him and crossed her arms. "I'm not sure I can resist when you put it that way."

Loki's smirk grew as he reached out, wound his fingers through her belt loops, tugged firmly enough to force her two steps forward until she stood between his legs. "Always playing hard to get." His thumbs eased beneath her jacket, tracing a light pattern. "Always pretending there's something in the way between us."

"There is something in the way: your ego." Wearing her own grin, Jane boldly poked his chest. "It's right here, big as anything, and—"

In one smooth motion he cut off her jest. Coaxing her lips apart, he breathed in the sigh her words dissolved into. Her hands went still against his chest, and she could feel the outline of his muscles in a way she couldn't when he wore his usual attire. Behind them came the continued sound of cheering, but the only noise Jane registered was Loki's low growl and the way it vibrated through his being.

Breaking apart, he pulled her flush against his body, long fingers crept around to press flat to her lower back, and when he murmured in her ear, voice raspy and hot, she shivered in spite of herself.

"Let me have you, Jane Foster."

And there was little else she could do but breathlessly nod and allow him to transport her through space and back to the flat.

Locked elbows giving out, Jane collapsed onto Loki's chest with an exhausted sigh. Already she could feel him softening within her, but neither of them made any move to separate. They remained where they were, joined together, letting the winter air seeping through the thin windowpane cool their heated skin as their pants gradually slowed into steady breaths.

She lazily traced the outline of the muscles in his upper arm, following the valleys between his tricep and bicep, his bicep and deltoid. At the same time, he twirled locks of her hair around his fingers, tugging with just the right amount of pressure when the strands wouldn't twist anymore before letting them unravel so he could do it again.

Lulled by the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, Jane's eyes closed. The promise of a contented sleep played at the edges of her mind and effectively dulled her thoughts, which made it even harder to come back to reality when she registered the sensation of lips forming words against her hair. By the time she pulled herself from the half-dreamlike state, though, Loki had already finished speaking.

"What?"

"You weren't listening?"
Lips quirking at his accusing tone, she cracked one eye to look at the clock. "It's almost one in the morning, which means I have to get up for work in a little over five hours. Forgive me if I think sleep a little more important than pillow talk."

Jane stubbornly closed her eyes again, but the silence that had been calming before now felt stifling. The words left unsaid tickled at the back of her mind, and the more she tried to push away the need to know what he'd said, the more her curiosity pushed away sleep. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she gave in.

With a slight groan, she rolled from on top of Loki to the bed beside him, stretching out on her side and propping her head up in one hand to fix him with a searching look. "Alright, what did you say?"

He didn't face her, just looked at her slyly from the corner of his eye. "What happened to pillow talk being unimportant?"

"Ugh… just answer the question."

Without warning, he sat up just enough to push her flat onto the bed before settling on top of her, alleviating some of his weight by bracing himself on his elbows. Jane swallowed hard and stared into eyes that, for once, appeared to be more grey than green. They swirled like a storm beneath his lowered brows, the only visible sign that something was bothering him.

"Do you think of me while I am in Asgard?"

Her mouth worked uselessly for a moment. "What?" It was such a domestic thing to ask and so unlike the God of Mischief she knew. Almost revealing, almost… vulnerable.

"You're remarkably eloquent this evening."

Flushing at the comment, she frowned at him. "That wasn't what you said."

"No, it wasn't." Loki's attention roamed her face, moving slowly down the bridge of her nose across to her reddened cheeks and finally to her mouth before returning to her eyes. "But it's what I'm asking now."

The conversation had taken a quick turn into something decidedly more precarious. Just like the one she'd shared with Katja, it was a dangerous subject, and for one brief second she contemplated lying. But then, there was little use in trying to fool a proficient at his own game.

Her eyes wavered and then lowered to stare at the strong line of his jaw. "Yes."

"Often?"

If possible, Jane's flush deepened as she whispered words that were more air than substance. "More than I probably should." Since the fact that she'd said *more than I probably should* instead of *more than I'd like* didn't escape her notice, it was almost a guarantee that it didn't escape Loki's either. Masking her embarrassment with a cough, she tried to redirect the conversation. "Why do you ask?"

Instead of answering, though, Loki dipped his head, lowering it into the crook of her neck, and when he spoke, she felt the movement of his lips against her collarbone. "Do you long for me when we're apart?"

At his words, the heat that had centered in her cheeks steadily spread down into her neck. She tilted her head to force his away while the hands that had been resting at his side tugged on his hair to the point he raised his head so she could meet his gaze.
"Why are you asking me this?"

His eyes flicked between hers. "Do you?"

"I don't see how it—"

"Do you?"

"Loki—"

"Do you?"

"Yes!" With a frustrated groan, she threw her head back against the mattress and stared unseeingly at the ceiling. "Yes, I think about you and the things we do and the way you make me feel even when we're not together. Does that make you happy? Is that what you want to hear?"

Mortified, Jane released his hair to cover her face. The darkness did nothing to change what she'd admitted, but at least it provided a way to avoid Loki's keen stare. Even still, the weight of his regard was heavy. She was so consumed in trying to ignore it that she jerked when his fingers traced the shell of her ear.

"You desire me because of the risks involved. It thrills you…" Down his fingers crept, easing across her neck, her shoulder, her side, into the dip of her waist and out over the swell of her hip before reversing to follow the same path. "The allure of danger, the threat of uncertainty, the doubt in the back of your mind of whether I'll kiss you or kill you."

He phrased it as a statement, but Jane could hear the question underneath. There was an unspoken need for her to either confirm or deny the claim, and in the quiet of her hesitation, she could taste the bitter quality of what he'd said, could practically see his curling sneer through her hand. It was strange to imagine Loki needing anything. He was a Prince of Asgard with an infinite lifespan and limitless amounts of magic at his disposal… and yet he needed something as basic as reassurance that she genuinely enjoyed his company.

All the powers of a god.

All the misgivings of a human.

"I've never been a risk-seeker. You know that. I desire you because it's you." She blew out a deep breath. "And anyway, you wouldn't kill me."

His fingers draped across the expanse of her neck. "You're so sure?"

Uncovering her face, her gaze immediately found his. A lifetime ago, in the cold expanse of Norway, Jane might have been deceived by the hardened set of his jaw, the steely glint in his eyes, the tension in his shoulders, but now… now all she saw was the underlying qualms.

For two vastly different people, it was almost funny how similar they could be.

"I think we've spent enough time together by this point that we shouldn't feel the need to hide from each other." And whispering, she echoed his words from the morning after their first time together. "There's nothing wrong with letting go."

On a whim, Jane stretched up and caught Loki in a kiss. It took a moment for him to respond. Once he did, he pressed back against her urgently, and she swallowed the acrid taste of his confusion, his own reservations. When he pulled away, it was only to press his forehead to hers. Jane stared at his
closed eyelids, the delicate veins that crisscrossed them, the brows pulled low above them.

"What did you say earlier?"

His resigned exhale was warm against her cheek. "That I've missed this."

A soft chuckle forced its way out before she could prevent it. "It's only been two months since we last saw each other."

"Two months too long." The confession made Jane pause, and at the sound of her breath hitching, Loki's eyes opened and slowly met hers. "I still don't know what it is about you." He studied her like she was a puzzle he could figure out, like he could discover the answer if he searched hard enough. "I sit through meetings in a distracted daze, I walk through the palace gardens without seeing the splendor, I attend feasts but feel no desire for the food or the drink or the women. My body may be in the Realm Eternal, but my mind is in Midgard."

When he didn't continue, she supplied in a low voice. "And that's a bad thing?"

"I used to think so."

"And now?"

But Loki's only reply was a kiss filled with a kind of quiet desperation, a nonverbal answer that spoke louder than words.

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – in the aftermath of World War II, Germany was divided into separate states. Under the control of the Soviet Union, the eastern state was renamed the German Democratic Republic. Similarly, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States combined their three western states to form the Federal Republic of Germany. However, despite the agreement, tensions remained high between the United States and the Soviet Union, something that would be demonstrated in 1961 when the Berlin Wall was erected to prevent travel between the two states.

Life in East Germany was difficult. Through the years, importing became harder, and ultimately, the shortage of goods made money essentially useless to those that lived there. In addition, those caught attempting to escape were either shot on sight or taken into custody and punished.

In early 1989, a series of revolts in neighboring countries inspired those living in the GDR, which set the stage for the latter half of the year.

During a press conference in November of 1989, Günter Schabowski was given a note that said East Germans would be allowed to cross the border with proper permission but given no further instructions on how to handle the information. Therefore, when a reporter asked when the regulations would come into effect, he responded that it was effective immediately, not knowing otherwise. The news spread quickly, and by that evening, East Germans massed at the wall and demanded to be let through. Unprepared, the border guards tried to stall for time but eventually opened the gates. Even still, the Germans ended up tearing down the Berlin Wall, and the two states were reunited as
one country in 1990.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
1995: Norway

Chapter Notes

So... I’m an accountant, which means anything having to do with science-y stuff is a product of research and is all way over my head. If you’re a physics expert, feel free to gloss over any mistakes I might have made.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirteen

“She yearns to learn how his tide is turned, to understand each grain of sand he knows, to move in rhythm with his ebb and flow.”

1995: Norway

"What are you doing?"

"Come now, Jane, I would think it fairly obvious."

"You're distracting me."

"That would be the general point."

"Well, could you stop?"

"No."

Jane tried her best to focus on the textbook laid out on the coffee table instead of the body that had slid into the empty space between her back and the couch. It wasn't easy, though. Heat seemed to radiate in the minimal space between them, a direct result of the hands that were steadily kneading their way down her sides and the mouth that had affixed itself to the juncture where her neck met her shoulder.

Despite her resolve, she shivered when Loki sucked particularly hard, barely managing to hide the reaction in the motion of her pulling away. "I have an exam in a couple days and an unreal amount of studying to do before then to prepare, so if you don't mind…” She slapped away the hands that had begun to slink between her thighs.

"Actually, I do mind."

But then, Jane already knew that.

The lips that couldn't quite reach her neck anymore brushed down the length of her spine, and not to
be deterred, his fingers settled back at her waist for only a moment before moving once again, tracing meandering paths across her abdomen. Their continued pattern was tolerable, but when he began to dip a little lower with each rotation, the words on the page started to blur and her hips shifted of their own accord.

She withstood the teasing for as long as possible, but in the end, she was only human. So when Loki's fingers brushed a little too close – but not nearly close enough – she huffed in mock exasperation, slammed the textbook closed, and twisted, knees pushing against his inner thigh.

"I will never understand how you do it."

Loki was all smirk and bravado and pure, unadulterated confidence as he tugged her impossibly closer to breathe into her ear. "Do what?"

"Always get your way." A soft exhale forced its way out when his fingers dipped between her legs. "I mean, it doesn't always happen, but still… most of the time you just assume you can get away with anything and start doing whatever you want without asking. You believe you're going to succeed, and you do." Exam completely forgotten, she shook her head and buried it in his chest. "It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy."

As his thumb moved in lazy circles, the sigh dissolved into a groan and her hands fisted in his surcoat. "One you seem to be enjoying."

"Stroking your own ego is not attractive, Loki."

"Perhaps not." Then his lips curled around an even wider smirk against her shoulder. "But if you'd prefer, there are other things you could stroke, such as—"

Jane's head snapped up so quickly she almost knocked into his. "Don't even think about finishing that sentence."

"It was just a suggestion."

All signs of mischief and manipulation had been wiped clean in favor of an innocence that appeared to be so genuine it was frightening, and Jane was absolutely sure that level of skill was exactly how he got away with all his tricks and had earned his title. However, spending countless centuries in the company of the God of Mischief had given her plenty of ideas of her own and a playful streak to match it.

"Just a suggestion…" She schooled her features into a carefully unassuming expression that was an almost perfect mirror of Loki's. "Well, if we're trading suggestions, maybe I can offer something comparable?"

They both knew that, no matter how hard she tried, she'd never be able to match him when it came to mischief… but every once in a while, she was able to take him by surprise. So she couldn't help but feel smug at the way Loki's breath hitched as she deftly unclasped his pants and slid onto the floor between his legs.

"Who was he?"
Around a brow furrowed in concentration and a mind preoccupied by the game at hand, Jane absently responded as her knight moved, taking the spot of Loki's remaining bishop. "Who was who?"

"The boy." Without so much as a second's pause, Loki nudged his rook two spaces forward. "The one here the other night."

She was so absorbed in trying to figure out what moves he had planned that it took a moment for understanding to filter through. When it did, she blinked and looked up. "Øyvind?"

"His name is of little importance. I'm more interested in who he is to you." Time dragged out into minutes, and realizing her focus was no longer on the game, he met her eyes. "It's your move, Jane."

After introducing Loki to chess one stormy night, it had become a regular pastime of theirs during his visits. Initially, she believed it was the tactics of the game that had attracted him to it. Now she thought it had more to do with the fact he liked to toy with her before delivering the final kill. He was a strategist to the core.

Normally, she would be intent on the game, immune to distractions of any kind in a bid to win – her victories were few and far in between; he was virtually impossible to beat – but there was something in his voice that gave her pause.

"I knew that was you." Jane leaned back in the chair, abandoning the game for a moment. "It was cold enough to where I thought it might have just been a chill, but really it was you sneaking into my flat." Arms crossed, she arched an eyebrow imperiously. "I thought we were past you lurking around unseen."

"And I thought we were past you believing I submitted to a human's whims."

"Fair enough..." Having learned early on to pick and choose her battles when it came to Loki, she let the comment go. Then she held out her hands and sighed dramatically. "But you were making such progress. You were doing so well."

Biting her lip to stifle her grin, Jane ignored Loki's deadpan expression and stretched forward just enough to move her queen across the board to take one of his pawns. Setting the piece aside, her eyes flitted over the remaining chessmen as she tried to read his strategy. There were several options. He could either try to corner her between his rook and his knight, use his knight and a pawn to force her directly into the rook's path, or...

"Who was the boy, Jane?"

Conversation interrupted for the second time in the same game, she frowned. "I already told you, his name is Øyvind." But as she brought a glass of wine to her mouth, she could still see the determination laced through Loki's features and knew he wouldn't let go of the subject. So after taking a sip, she fixed him with a perceptive gaze, carefully fingering the delicate stem of the glass. "Why do you want to know so badly?"

With the tables turned, though, and the focus shifted onto him, Loki's eyes flicked down to the board. "I don't." He moved his knight closer to her king, taking away one of her pawns. "Your move."

"Nice try, Loki."

Slowly, she rotated the glass in her hand as she continued to regard him. An abundance of time and experience had made Loki a master of deception, the God of both Mischief and Lies, but the same things had granted Jane the ability to read between the lines to the things he tried to keep hidden. On
the surface, there was only the smooth face of indifference and possibly a hint of annoyance for their game being disrupted, but underneath… beneath the cool façade was something that made her own confidence falter and stumble if only because it was so unexpected.

"Don't tell me you're…” She sat up a little straighter, leaned forward almost imperceptibly. "Are you jealous?"

"Of a mortal boy?" Loki snorted a dismissive laugh. "Hardly." But there was an edge to the wry quirk of his lips that wasn't quite right, was a little too far from typical.

"You are." The words were a borderline whisper, almost in awe that the cause of his questions could be something so… human. "You're jealous that I spent so much time with him the other night."

That hard edge at the corners of his mouth extended to his eyes, darkening the normally cool grey-green to a steel-colored storm. "How much time you spend with your mortal lover is inconsequential when it will only—"

"Is that what you think he is? My lover?" It was difficult to tell if the frown that stole across his face was because she'd interrupted or because she was correct. "Øyvind and I are just working on a group project for one of my classes. We're not sleeping together."

"Not yet." Dark eyes bored into hers before briefly roaming across her features. "He is quite taken with you, Jane… and I am not in the habit of sharing things that are mine."

The wine glass completed three more revolutions in her hand before she set it down. On the table, her fingers remained around the stem, one nail tapping lightly against the crystal as her thumb followed a back and forth track around its base, but her other hand came up to cup her chin when she leaned on the table.

"You don't have to be worried, you know. This might be a strange thing we have going on, but it's worked well so far." Jane held his gaze, despite its intensity. Or maybe it was because of its intensity, because she knew that even gods needed reassurance from time to time. "I'm not unhappy."

The clock on the wall ticked away the time as Loki observed her. His eyes flicked between hers, but then he blinked, reached out to move a piece, and sat back in the chair with a small grin.

"Checkmate."

And as she knocked over her king in surrender, she pretended not to know that Loki's grin was about more than the game he'd just won.

Jane stirred the pot of soup, attention drifting from the simmering concoction to the God of Mischief seated on the other side of the island more often than not. Perched on the barstool, he was poring over some book he'd plucked from her bookshelf, had been for the past ten or so minutes. Whatever it was that had captured his interest, though, she didn't know. Her mind was too focused on a different book.

"So I was reading the Prose Edda again the other day…” The long fingers that had been steadily flipping through the pages stilled as Loki's body visibly tensed. "Don't get all weird when you don't even know what I'm going to say. I promised I wouldn't bring up those stories anymore."
It took only one instance in addition to their initial discussion of the stories involving Loki's supposed children back in nineteenth century England for Jane to be convinced not to bring up the subject anymore. Being unexpectedly taken through space to the snow-covered peak of Mont Blanc wearing nothing but her pajamas wasn't something she was keen on experiencing again.

"I was just wondering if there was anyone named Heimdall in Asgard."

Immediately, the tension eased from his shoulders, but a wary sort of cautiousness remained as he turned another page. "There is."

"And is it true that he can see everything that's happening in all the realms?"

"It is."

"Does he know about us, then?" Jane peeked at him from beneath her lashes. "Is he aware of everything that's happened between us?"

For one long moment, she stared at his downcast eyes. For another, she stared at the page still held upright between his fingers. And she'd never really considered herself a patient person, but when his gaze lifted to hers, she turned off the stove and waited for him to answer. It was a stalemate, one of their countless impasses. In the end, though, whether centuries of life had granted her more patience or just made Loki more apt to giving in, she had to fight a small smile when he responded.

"Heimdall is the watcher of all the realms, the sentry of the Realm Eternal, an eternal guard that stands at the edge of the Bi-Frost where the Great Sea pours over the edge of the land. There, he stares out into the Void and sees all. He is constantly monitoring all that transpires and reporting items of interest to the All-Father." Loki closed the book without breaking their gaze. "Everything, that is, except you."

It was the answer to a question that had been on her mind since she'd first read about the Gatekeeper in the Poetic Edda, but as was the norm with any of Loki's answers, they only led to more questions, a perpetual circle to which she should've been accustomed to by now.

"What do you mean?" Leaning forward, Jane rested her elbows on the countertop, clasping her hands out in front of her, regarding him carefully through narrowed eyes. "If Heimdall can see everything that's happening, what stops him from seeing me?" But then she paused, and the breath caught in her throat even before the corners of his mouth twitched in a half-smirk. "You stop him."

Almost in wonder, she murmured the question that wasn't really a question. "How?"

"Magic."

And the look he leveled her with was so casual, so blasé, so you even have to ask? that Jane shook her head in amazement.

She knew Loki was powerful. There had never been any doubt about that. If all the times she'd witnessed his magic wasn't proof enough, the ease with which he'd dispatched the fire giants was. What she didn't know was that his capacity for magic extended to the point that he could deceive the watcher of the realms for over nine hundred years.

"So he doesn't know about me." Loki's chin dipped in a silent affirmation of the statement. "Does he know you've been frequenting Midgard all these years?"

"No."

She paused, trying to figure out how best to continue. Ask the right question and she'd receive an
answer. Ask the wrong one and the conversation would come to an end. But even though rationality insisted not to wander too far into territory she knew might cause him to shut down, she couldn't help but pursue the thoughts that constantly burned at the back of her mind.

"Does he know you can travel between the realms without the Bi-Frost?"

"No."

"Does he know you gave away one of Iðunn's apples?"

"No."

"Did he even know you had one of the apples?"

"No."

"Does he know the fire giants have been coming to this realm?"

"No."

"Does he know they can move between the realms without the Bi-Frost?"

"No."

Jane ground out a frustrated growl. "Damn it, does he know anything?" And in the split-second before she lowered her head onto her forearms, she saw Loki's now full-blown smirk dissolve into a laugh.

Any other time, she would've enjoyed hearing him laugh. In the past, it had often been tainted with the occasionally cruel edge to his disposition, but now it was one of those things she felt didn't happen very much and wished would happen more. So long as it was genuine, it was pleasant and habitually forced a smile from her.

But right then she neither smiled nor appreciated his laughter.

Not when it came at her expense.

"Debatable." Loki's laugh tapered off to a chuckle. "The Gatekeeper is not quite as ignorant as I make out, though. He knows the fire giants search for me."

Trying not to let the instinctive rush of excitement make her too optimistic, Jane spoke into the triangular space between her arms and the countertop, the words muffled in the narrow area. "Does he know why they're looking for you?"

"No."

"Figures…" She bit back her sigh, folded her arms over each other, and lifted her head enough to rest her chin on them. It was staggering to think that Loki could keep so many things hidden from the all-seeing Heimdall. "Can you at least tell me why?"

The movement of Loki's brow rising caught her eye. "Why I conceal you from his view?"

Jane nodded as best she could with her awkward position. "But not just me. The apple, all of our interactions, the fact that you come to this realm, the mess with the fire giants…"

The still-bubbling soup needed to be stirred and the book Loki had been reading needed to be put
away, but aside from Jane shifting her weight from one foot to the other, neither of them moved. They remained where they were, staring at each other impassively, until Loki's chin dipped slightly.

"There will always be things I cannot tell you, Jane… no matter how many times you ask or how badly you wish to know."

It was the response she expected, even if she'd held out a tiny sliver of hope for something different. She was an immortal human, an unchanging figure in a world full of change. Surrounding her were things beyond her control and understanding, and their mystery was an endless dance in which she was caught.

With a sigh, Jane straightened off the counter and picked up the spoon to stir the soup. However, avoiding Loki's eyes didn't prevent her from noticing the pensive look on his face as he stood.

"What do you think?"

"I think you hide me because you want to keep me all to yourself." There was no doubt it was far more complicated than that, but it sounded good, if nothing else. "I think you hide everything else because you like to be the one holding all the cards." That supposition probably landed much closer to the truth. "And I don't think I've ever met someone so complicated as you."

Water edged higher and higher on the beach until it finally encased Jane's feet in what felt like ice. After spending a few years roaming the states that bordered the United States' Gulf of Mexico and enjoying their moderate temperatures, the cold of the Baltic Sea was a shock. Long ago, she would've jumped in and swam in spite of its frigidity. Now she was doing well to let it lap at her feet for a few minutes before drying off and slipping them back into her wool socks and boots.

She slowly stepped out of the surf, and farther up the bank, away from the incoming tide, she dropped to the ground to bury her toes in the sand.

When she'd arrived, a handful of people had dotted the beach. Their actions, however, were an inverse correlation to the weather. As it grew more ominous – sky darkening, wind picking up, lightning flashing in the distance – they grew more scant. One gentleman had remained longer than the rest, but a cursory glance revealed him to be gone as well.

Now there was nothing but Jane, the smooth expanse of the beach, the clouds that hung dark and heavy overhead with the promise of rain, and the weight of the past.

Without warning, her nose tingled and her vision blurred. Memories that walked the edge of painful and pleasant had always come up at the strangest times, but they seemed to be plaguing her even more as of late. Normally, she could handle them – their bittersweet sting wasn't quite as harsh as it had once been – but there was something about the icy sea, the smooth beach, the rugged land that unraveled the threads of control she'd built up over the years.

It was easier to blame the ache in her chest on the ever-changing social and political issues of the world, the rise and fall of power, the constant struggle between nations that had led her to seek out a place that was more isolated, but to do so, to cast all blame on whatever wild thought had convinced her to move back to Norway, would be a lie. Because the hard truth of it was that she'd wanted to return.
After so long, she'd believed herself to be ready to face the past.

But she wasn't any more ready now than when she'd woken on the Christians' ship.

The open field behind her that had once contained an entire village of Vikings was empty. No buildings or dirt paths; no children practicing with short swords as they dreamed of the days when they'd be old enough to sail to other lands; no wives with their eyes on the horizon, waiting for the ships that carried their husbands back to them to appear. No brown-haired, bright-eyed, freckle-faced little girl playing and laughing with her parents.

Jane felt the telltale shift in the air before she felt the shift in the sand and, from the corner of her eye, saw the dark line of Loki's clothing fold in on itself as he sat beside her. For a long time they said nothing, just sat there in a companionable silence while they listened to the waves and watched the clouds roil overhead. It wasn't until the moisture in her eyes built up enough for a single tear to slide down her cheek that he breached the silence.

"You smell like salt."

It was only the briny air clinging to her skin that made her smell that way, but it was easy to imagine it was the salt crusted in her eyelashes, the remnants left in the wet track down her cheek, that were the cause.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather be alone right now."

Undeterred, Loki shifted to rest his arms on his bent legs, the motion bringing them so close their legs and shoulders were touching. "Who are you in this place?"

Jane issued a dispassionate sigh very nearly hidden in the southern wind. Throughout most of their time spent together, it had been obvious that Loki would sooner disappear than delve too deeply into her personal life. Human emotions were messy. That was what he'd once told her. Sometimes his aloofness bothered her, but most of the time, she was indifferent on the matter.

How ironic that the one time she actually wanted him to do what he'd always done so well was the one time he didn't.

"I'm a student attending the University of Tromsø, and I'm renting a flat for an exorbitant amount of money each month because my parents are wealthy enough to help support me. They're not around, though. They've left trusted people in charge of the corporation that helped make them so rich and have decided to go on a permanent staycation to New Zealand."

"Quite an elaborate ruse for someone who usually remains discreet." He continued without waiting for her to comment. "And your name?"

"Signe."

Beside her, Loki repeated it in a murmur, tested the weight of a name he'd known was hers but had never called her. Respect was one thing she'd never been able to hold against him. He'd always recognized her need to keep the past separate. They might have brought it up in a passing reference, but neither of them had ever dwelled on the topic. It was one of their unspoken agreements.

A part of her had died with the rest of her people, had been buried in the desolate and wasted ruins of that village. The person who had walked those paths was not the same one who walked them now. Leaving Norway was the defining moment of her life, the moment everything had changed.

Signe had been left behind.
Jane had been born.

But the line between the past and the present was fading because returning had opened a door that had been tightly shut for so long. Things were merging together. Sometimes she saw Jane in the mirror, sometimes she saw Signe… and sometimes she didn't know who she saw because she didn't know who she was.

"So the restless wanderer returns home at last." The words pulled Jane from her thoughts, and when she turned to Loki, she found him to be already staring down at her. "You've come full circle."

"I suppose so." Although the thought only made her eyes blur all the more. "Did you know the first time I heard someone actually call my name, I cried?" Unable to hold his gaze, she turned back to the sea. "Broke down right there in the middle of the street and cried so hard I couldn't breathe."

It had felt right to assume her original identity, to be herself… right until she'd heard someone say it.

"Understandable."

"Not really." Her laugh sounded harsh, grating over her tongue like sandpaper. "I shouldn't still be so…"

Loki picked up the strands of the conversation when she trailed off. "It would be unnatural for you to feel nothing, Jane. You are only human."

Struggling to hold back the tears, to hold on to the shattered fragments of her self-control, she sucked in deep breaths and tried to calm the rush of blood in her ears, the frantic pace of her heart. But then Loki was slipping an arm around her shoulders. He pulled her against his side, and in the warmth of his embrace, she couldn't fight it anymore, didn't want to fight it, didn't even want to try.

"After all this time, I didn't think it would hurt this much, but it does. God, it does. It hurts so much, and I can't take it. I can't take it. I feel like my heart's being ripped from my chest, but it's not. My heart is still there, and I almost wish it wasn't because having it torn out would probably hurt less."

As if to match her despondency, the growing storm reached its breaking point right as Jane reached hers, and it was with a crack of thunder that the skies emptied themselves on top of the pair. The rain soothed the fire of her pain, but the blaze had already done its work, burned up all her words and left her hollow and empty, a shell, a husk.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm in limbo." Jane blinked away the raindrops collecting on her eyelashes, head lowered and pressed to Loki's chest as she all but curled into him. "Like I'm not quite dead, but I'm not sure how to live."

Loki didn't respond, just sat there while the hand not wrapped around her shoulders carded gently through her hair. And, really, she wasn't sure if she wanted him to say anything because sometimes silence, a comforting embrace, and the presence of the one person who knew her better than anyone in all the realms were the things she needed most.

"Sometimes I think it would be more conducive to my sanity to have a relationship with someone normal."
Crossing her arms over the binder she held, Jane leaned back against the table, eyeing Loki carefully as he wended her way. "As in your Øyvind?"

"Perhaps." Her shoulders rose and fell in a nonchalant shrug. "It would certainly make him happy."

Loki had been right when he'd said Øyvind was taken with her. The number of times he'd asked her to dinner or to the movies or if she just wanted to hang out at his place spanned well into the double digits. His persistence was admirable. And somewhat flattering.

"I doubt any mortal lover you adopt would hold your interest for long."

"Oh?" When he stopped with no more than a few inches separating them, she was forced to crane her head to hold his gaze. She did so boldly, though, jaw set and eyes sharp. "And why's that?"

For a moment, he seemed content to observe her, attention roaming her face. Then slowly, deliberately, with smooth motions that brought to mind a predator stalking its prey, he placed both hands on the tabletop, arms on either side of her body, trapping her in place, and as he leaned in, Jane leaned away to maintain what little distance there was between them. Doing so was a necessity. If she didn't, she ran the risk of forgetting to play the game of power they'd started and simply crushing her lips to his instead.

It was a delicate balance, a tightrope she'd never been very skilled at walking.

Her back arched over the edge of the table, crossed arms pressing to his chest while the binder pressed to hers. They remained at their impasse for a while, long enough for the determination laced through her features to waver, but it wasn't until her legs began to tremble that his hands left the tabletop, slipped beneath her thighs to lift her onto the surface. And once she was seated, he stepped forward to occupy the space between her legs.

"I've heard the sounds you make when I touch you, Jane."

Loki's hands slid along the outside of her thighs, curled around her hips before flattening over her lower back. With the slightest pressure, he pulled her to the edge of the table, just close enough to where he could press himself firmly against her.

"I've seen the expression on your face when you're in the throes of passion."

Lost in the sea of his eyes, Jane allowed the binder to be plucked from her hands and tossed haphazardly to the floor. She didn't know how he always managed to captivate her so thoroughly. Then again, the feelings he evoked weren't entirely unwelcome.

"You think another man could make you feel that way?" His hands dragged up her sides, taking her shirt with them. "Could leave you gasping?" The material was like water as it ghosted over her arms that lifted automatically. "Could make you burn the way I do?"

Like the binder, her shirt was cast aside. It was impossible to care about either of them, though, not when Loki splayed his fingers around her waist and kissed a heated path from her shoulder to her neck, from her neck to her ear, from her ear to her lips.

"You think you make me burn?" Denial, self-control, and resolve were all contradicted by the breathy quality of her voice.

Loki grinned against her mouth. "I do."

"And what gives you that idea?"
"Because I know I'm not the only one to feel it." He pulled back then, just enough to meet her gaze. The grin still curled his lips, but when he pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes, it faltered, lowered, shifted to one that was a little less teasing and a little more resigned, wanting. "I burn for you, Jane."

The sky overhead was still dark, but the far horizon was painted with the beginnings of sunrise. Reds, oranges, pinks, and yellows all danced together, bleeding from one color to the next, ever-expanding to chase away the lingering pinpricks of stars and the waning moon that dangled in the opposite corner of the sky.

Lounging on an old sleeping bag, Jane crossed her arms beneath her head and watched the slow progression. Around her, the dew on the grass turned to ice, but buried beneath two wool blankets, she didn't feel the bite of Norway's autumn mornings. What she did feel, though, was the familiar whisper of magic across her skin.

"It's not very often I find you awake this early."

Her head fell to the side so she could watch Loki step through space. "Says the one who keeps me in bed all day whenever he spends the night." The jab was made null by the wide grin on her face.

In the distance, the edge of the sun crept over the skyline, a brilliant and bloody red. The light gradually stole over the land, and Jane felt the first real traces of warmth chase away the chill of daybreak when it touched her face. With a wonder that hadn't been lost in almost one thousand years, she watched the sky brighten under the myriad of hues.

"It's amazing, really, how something so beautiful can be the result of something so small... the right combination of molecules and small particles and wavelengths." She spared a glance for the God of Mischief now lying beside her. "You used to say there was nothing in this realm that could ever compare to the Realm Eternal."

"I did."

"But here you are watching the sunrise with me."

"So it would seem."

"Be careful, Loki..." His attention was still on the sky, but he didn't need to see her expression. The teasing quality was too obvious to be mistaken. "Spend too much time admiring sunrises and sunsets with me and I'll start to think you prefer Midgard to Asgard."

"That is something that will never come to pass." Almost languidly, Loki rolled onto his side to stare down at her. He studied her for a little while before the backs of his fingers began to trace the outline of her face. "But Midgard is not without its merits."

The grin from earlier was back, hovering just on the edge of a playful smirk. "Are you talking about me?"

Loki's fingers reached her chin, settled there, held gently as he leaned down to capture her lips in a soft kiss. His thumb stroked a repeated path across her jawbone, continuing even after he'd pulled away to murmur quietly.
"Don't be silly, Jane."

"It's looped around like this, u-shaped and open on this side…"

Snagging a piece of paper, Jane drew a rough outline of the model. Science was her forte, not sketching or artistry, but the diagram was basic enough even for her. When finished, she leaned back against the chair to admire her work even as Loki pulled the drawing across the table to inspect it. He turned it first one way and then the other before glancing up.

"That doesn't make any sense."

She frowned at the quick dismissal. "Yes, it does."

"No…" He emphasized the word as he pushed the paper back towards her. "It doesn't."

Still frowning, she reached for another blank piece of paper from the stack to her right. The fact that it remained there was a surprise considering their activities on the surface of the table a few minutes ago. All the other papers and books that had been there now littered the floor, having been swept aside by Loki's arm in one smooth motion as he'd lowered Jane onto the table and taken her.

"The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, right?"

"Correct."

"Wrong." Being able to say Loki was wrong felt even better when he walked right into it. "I mean, you could just go the straight route…" She scribbled an A and a B on opposite ends of the paper and a line between them. "Or you could fold the paper so the two points meet. Instead of using propulsion to get to point B, you manipulate space-time to bring the destination closer to you."

Slowly, Loki brought an elbow to the table, resting his chin on his thumb and draping his fingers across his lips. There was an intense focus in his eyes as he looked between the folded piece of paper between them and the model from before.

"They call it folded space-time."

His attention continued to flick back and forth for a moment before lifting to meet her gaze. "And humans believe they can discover a way to control space-time?"

"Why couldn't we?" With a shrug, Jane brought both legs up to cross them beneath her on the chair. "Do you remember that time you looked through my telescope?" Loki's blank expression did nothing to either confirm or deny her question. "I told you that some of the stars you could see were actually behind the sun and the only reason they were visible was because the sun's mass and gravity bent space enough for light waves to do likewise?"

When she paused to force a response, Loki mumbled from between his fingers. "I remember."

"Okay, so if gravity can bend space, it means the principle is sound." Jane leaned forward to repeatedly unfold and refold the paper. "We just need to figure out a way to generate and manipulate a sufficient amount of gravity, enough that we could bend space-time and fold it over on itself."

Two and a quarter centuries of studies, and it all boiled down to that. She understood the concept,
had travelled through space often enough with Loki to comprehend the general workings of it. What
she lacked was the ability to put the theory into motion, a source of energy.

It was the last piece of the puzzle.

It was the last thing she needed.

Where Jane's focus lingered on the two sheets of paper, Loki's was fixed on her face, keenly
regarding her. She didn't need to look up to feel it. "Midgardian science has progressed throughout
the years, I'll admit… but manipulating space? Folding it?" He shook his head, dismissing the idea.
"It's ridiculous, Jane."

"I know it can be hard to imagine, but it makes sense." She reached for the initial drawing and the
pen, darkened two circles on either side of the u-shaped model. "Say each of these circles is the
entrance to a realm." Then she drew a tube between them. "After you fold space-time, an Einstein-
Rosen bridge would connect the gap between them and allow passage."

"Jane…"

"It's what you do when you move through space. I know you say you're opening seams but the area
between one place and another is space-time and anytime you're in that space, you've created an
Einstein-Rosen bridge, which means that every time you step from place to place, what you're really
doing is travelling through a bridge just like this one."

"Jane."

"And I know on paper it seems like it would take a while to get from one point to the next, but it
only takes a couple seconds to travel from realm to realm and if you can do it and the Bi-Frost can do
it and the fire giants can do it, so can we."

"Jane."

Loki's tone was finally forceful enough to break through her thoughts, and in the wake of her
rambling, all she could do was stare across the table at him, jaw somewhat slack and pen loose in her
fingers. The excitement of the moment bled away, leaving her partially deflated.

It wasn't very often she got caught up in the subject like she had – that was a habit she'd broken
herself of many years ago – but Loki had been the one to bring it up. He'd asked about her studies
when a page of her notes had stuck to his sweat-slick forearm after they'd finished, and it was only
her duty to explain them as best she could.

That was what she'd told herself, at least.

She'd slipped off the table, pulled on her underwear and an old tank top, and righted one of the
overturned chairs. Then, plopping down into it, she'd starting her explanation. In the end, it didn't
matter if Loki refused to agree with or believe her because she knew. Jane knew that it was only a
matter of time now before the secrets of inter-realm travel revealed themselves to her.

She was so close she could almost taste it.

"Even if what you're saying is possible…" Loki's voice was significantly softer than when he'd
silenced her. "The amount of power needed to fold space and open one of your bridges would be
astronomical."

Despite his almost soothing tone, Jane deflated even more. "I know. We'd need the source to be
extreme… like harnessing the energy of a supernova or something equally as impossible to capture."

"And that doesn't even take into account the gravitational forces of all the objects in this realm."

"What do you mean?"

Loki unfolded the second piece of paper and laid it flat on the table between them. With a flick of his fingers, numerous dots appeared across the page, the difference in each of the dots' size helping to create a three-dimensional universe on the two-dimensional plane. They were various colors also, all of them containing such detail that there was no mistaking which one was Earth versus Saturn, the sun versus Jupiter.

"If gravity is what holds all the celestial bodies in place, what would happen if you manipulated space-time?" He curled up each side to form the u-shape they'd been discussing. "By folding the paper, wouldn't you be disrupting that force and possibly throwing them out of orbit?"

Head tilted to the side in contemplation, she nibbled her lower lip. Jane had always known Loki to be intelligent, but at what point he became well-versed enough in her studies to carry on a discussion about it, much less one that left her wondering how to respond, she couldn't say. Then the light bulb in her mind flared.

"Well, if space can be bent, maybe it's elastic." The idea took hold, and she ran with it. "And if that were true, whenever you control space-time, it would only be a local anomaly. Only the part you were manipulating would shift. There wouldn't be any effect on the rest of the universe."

"Or it might break."

Her mouth snapped closed, and she frowned. As much as she didn't like to hear it, she couldn't deny the truth of his statement, and after rolling the words around in her mouth, she echoed his words in agreement. "Or it might break." And realizing that, in spite of their debate, she was still stuck in the same place without a concrete answer, Jane drug a hand down her face. "Damn it."

For a long moment, the world consisted only of the hand that covered her eyes. She could hear the legs of Loki's chair scrape against the floor and his quiet footsteps as he stepped around the table, but the only thing she could do was see the lines that crisscrossed her palm, fuzzy with the closeness, and smell the faint scent of Loki and sex that still clung to her skin. Not until the paper under her elbow shifted did she lower her hand.

He'd turned the model towards himself, and when her attention slid up the length of his arm, across his bare chest, and over to his face, she saw it painted with an expression she couldn't put a name to. It wasn't anger or confusion or frustration on their own. Maybe it was a combination of all three, along with a dash of candid interest. Whatever it was also created a slight furrow between his brows as he regarded the page.

"So this is what you study?"

It was a return to the original question that had started their entire discussion. "At the University of Tromsø?" His chin dipped in an almost imperceptible nod, eyes meeting hers. "Yes… among other things. I'll be able to fine-tune my studies when I transfer to the University of Oslo next term."

"And you maintain that science can find a way to do what only magic has been able to accomplish in every other realm."

"Yes." Jane looked down at the drawing and felt the familiar stir of determination. It alone was the reason she had never – could never – abandon her goal no matter how many disappointments and
dead ends she experienced. "All I need is an energy source powerful enough to handle it."

Loki hummed an indistinct sound that went unacknowledged, pushed away from the table, and disappeared into the bedroom, but Jane remained seated there, staring at the models for quite some time before joining him in bed.

She could do this.

She knew she could do this.

She could figure it out.

"I want you." The force of Loki's fingers at her hips was hard enough to bruise, but Jane just arched her back and relished the feel of those same fingers tracing a line over the lithe arc of her body. "I want to take you... right here, right now, right on this god damn table."

"Then do it."

His gaze was somewhat startled when it found hers, but then he jerked back to life. With a half-growl, half-groan, he slid her further onto the piece of furniture and settled himself on top of her. And she couldn't be sure exactly when – she was too distracted by the feeling of his mouth on her neck – but somewhere in between all of that, he also made both their clothes vanish with a hasty gesture.

Wasting no more time, Loki joined them in one smooth stroke.

The pace he set was punishing. He moved with a desperation Jane had hardly ever seen in him before, but she refused to ask him to slow, just met him thrust for thrust, nails digging into his back and exhales huffing in time with his movements.

"I'm not the only one." Loki all but panted into the hollow of her throat. "I can't be the only one."

The words combined with the distressed edge to his tone made her pause. "Loki..." But not wanting her to voice the concern that was probably clear in her eyes, he just stole her breath and her words with a kiss.

"You feel it too. I know you do." His eyes never left hers as he continued to move, and Jane knew she'd never seen anything so vibrantly green as Loki's eyes were in that moment. "Tell me you feel it." Their rhythm faltered just long enough for him to lower himself onto his elbows. "Tell me I'm not the only one."

Words echoed in Jane's head.

And she was two centuries past the point of denying it.

"You're not." The energy in the air crackled along her skin like lightning, ignited the tension in the room to something tangible, something so palpable she could slice through it with a knife, and she felt her nerves tingle with the thunder reverberating through them. "You're not the only one who burns."
"Do you believe in fate, Jane Foster?"

"I believe in chance." The words came out in the rush of her contented sigh as Loki drew vague, invisible patterns on her bare back. "And maybe a bit of luck."

He was quiet for so long Jane believed that would be the end of their brief conversation, but just when she was slipping into that timeless place between sleep and awake, his voice pulled her back. "The Norns govern everything."

There was more to the comment than he let on, despite the offhand way in which he said it. That much was obvious. What she didn't know was the intention of their discussion. "So you're saying we were destined to meet on that battlefield? That a millennium ago, the Norns decided you would appear at that exact time and place?"

"That is what both our ancestors tell us."

"Maybe so, but I find it hard to believe that, of all things, we were ordained to meet. Looking back, it seems like there was an awful lot of chance involved." Jane peered up at him from the corner of one cracked eye. "Do you believe in fate, Loki Odinson?"

"I…" Moonlight filtered through the window, the only source of light in the room. It was just enough for her to make out Loki's profile as he stared off into the darkness. "I don't know anymore."

Chapter End Notes

History facts for this chapter – the University of Tromsø is the world’s northernmost university. Its seal consists of two ravens flying in opposite directions, which are meant to be Hugin and Munin, Odin’s two ravens from Norse mythology. The University of Oslo, the one Jane mentioned she’d be transferring to, is the oldest and largest university in Norway and is also one of Northern Europe’s most prestigious. There, people can attend the Institute of Theoretical Astrophysics to receive their Master’s in Cosmology or Solar Physics.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

When I first finished this chapter, it was something like twelve thousand words. Now, I’m all for long chapters – in fact, I prefer them – but that’s a little long, even for me. After a lot of deliberation, it ended up being split into thirds and expanded just a bit. Shorter chapters aren’t usually my thing, but it ended up flowing really well. Hopefully the content will make up for the shorter length. I promise not to make a habit of it, though, outside of these next three chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fourteen

“Pardon me while I burst into flames.”

2001: Sweden

Part One

Jane sat on the precipice of the cliff, legs dangling over the edge and fingernails dark with the dirt that had clumped beneath them when she buried her fingers in the earth. A slight breeze teased the grass around her, the swaying movement turning the field into a liquid grassland. Her wrists tickled with their light touch, but she refused to move, engrossed in the sight before her.

It was beautiful, the way the world seemed to stretch on forever. The never-ending blue of the Baltic Sea that surrounded Stora Karlsö was untouched by mankind or any signs of modern life, a mirror image of the sky above. Razorbills and guillemots were the only things to interrupt the scene, dotting the firmament as they swooped and soared and dove. Them, and the approaching boat that was most likely carrying tourists from Gotland.

She was watching a razorbill fly particularly close when the hair on her arms stood on end, and she absentmindedly rubbed them as a smile played at the corners of her mouth at the familiar sensation.

"Hello, Loki."

A slice of black that was his surcoat crept into her peripheral vision, cutting off the jagged edge of the cliff. Rather than sit next to her, he remained standing, hands clasped behind his back that was ramrod straight. "I think you've wasted half of your life gazing at nature."

"Wasted is a matter of opinion." No matter how many centuries her life spanned, Jane doubted she'd ever stop appreciating the beauty of nature. Every meadow, every beach, every mountain, every valley… they were all different, all wonderfully unique, all breathtaking in their own way. "And
anyway, how can you expect me not to?” She nodded out to the sea. "Look at that view."

The breeze wasn't quite strong enough to pull away his disdainful sniff without her hearing it first. "Barely adequate, at best."

Brows furrowed, Jane glanced up at Loki, scanned him from head to foot and back again. Normally the dismissal wouldn't faze her. Him putting down anything related to Midgard in favor of the Realm Eternal was something she'd become accustomed to over the years. So it wasn't his remark as much as the harshness in his tone that gave her pause.

It had been a long time since she'd heard him sound so… unpleasant.

However, ignoring Loki's moodiness was probably the best thing to do, so with a mental shrug, Jane let his observation drop and turned back to the view.

"It's only been a few months, but I almost like living here better than Norway. If nothing else, it's easier." Returning to Norway after so many years had been nice, but the past had the tendency to creep up of its own accord, unexpectedly stealing her breath and twisting a knife into her heart. Two years was all it had taken her to realize she'd probably never be able to call the rugged land home ever again and move away. "Stora Karlsö carries the same atmosphere I'd been missing but without the emotional baggage."

Silence was her only response.

Leaning forward a bit, she peeked over the edge to the wave-beaten rocks below. "Honestly, I'm a little surprised you're here again already." Her heels thumped against the limestone cliff. "It's only been three days."

"I can always leave and wait the customary time before returning." Another semi-normal quip made abnormal by his tone. "Weekly visits could become monthly ones, or longer, if that's what you prefer."

After realizing Loki was on edge, Jane had avoided looking at him, but she couldn't prevent her eyes from briefly cutting to the side. "I never said I wanted that."

"Maybe not, but you make it seem as if you tire of my presence."

"No, I don't." All pretenses were abandoned as she stared outright. "You're reading awfully deep into what was meant to be just a simple observation." She reached over to curl a hand around the ankle closest to her. "You know I'm always glad to see you and that I like when you spend time here."

Almost immediately, though, Loki pulled his ankle out of reach. "Do I?" His attention met hers before darting away just as quickly.

It was the final straw. Having spent so much time together had granted Jane the gift of discernment when it came to Loki's needs. More often than not, she knew what to say, when to say it, and how best to say it. But all that time had also granted her enough confidence to challenge the things he said instead of taking them at face value. So giving up any attempt to overlook his brusqueness, she didn't even bother disguising her frown as she studied his profile.

"What's wrong with you?"

His jaw worked over itself a few times before he muttered darkly. "Nothing."
Any doubts she might have had were disproved by the heated look in his eyes, the angry set of his shoulders, the line of tension that wound up his back and made the tendons in his neck stand out. Loki's entire being was like a thundercloud, portentous, warning. Nothing was definitely something. Still, he repeated it again as if doing so would make it truer.

"Nothing."

"I hope you don't expect me to believe that." Where his tone was hard and angular, hers was soft and flowing. "If so the God of Lies must be losing his touch."

It was a weak attempt at lightening the conversation made in vain. In all honesty, Jane hadn't expected an answer so she couldn't say she was surprised when he spun around and began to pace behind her. Bending one knee and tucking her foot beneath the opposite leg, she rotated to better watch his silent progression.

"Something's wrong Loki… what is it?"

Back and forth he went, coat slicing violently through the air with every turn. The grass continued to flatten under his repeated path, and it wasn't until the seventh or eighth turn that he paused mid-spin, back to her, head canted just enough for his words to float over his shoulder.

"It's my brother."

"Thor?" Confirmation came in the form of Loki's resumed pacing. Her initial thought was that they'd been discovered, that the God of Thunder had finally caught onto his brother's actions after centuries of keeping his movements hidden from everyone. Despite the stab of worry, she probed deeper.

"What about him? Did he do something?"

"Not technically." He paused once again, this time angled towards Jane. "It's more my father." With an audible sigh, his gaze turned skyward. "The All-Father has announced Thor's coming crowning. He's to be made king in only a few years."

Slowly, Jane rose to her feet, eased away from the precipice, and took one halting step in Loki's direction before stopping. She stood there awkwardly picking at a hangnail as she tried and failed to follow the disjointed path between the All-Father's announcement and Loki's mood.

"I'm guessing that's a bad thing?"

"He's reckless, bigoted towards others, and allows pride to govern his every move." It was startling how quickly Loki faced her, whirling to fix her with a glower. "He's completely ill-suited for the throne and would sooner bring the realms to ruin than maintain the peace they have enjoyed for several centuries."

Jane thought of Loki's recklessness when he'd treated his battle with the fire giant in Russia like a game and the bigotry he displayed every time he'd alluded to and outright spoken of the inferiority of humans. As for pride… well, it was better not to dwell on that one. She hadn't met any other Æsir, but she figured it wasn't a stretch to assume that Asgardians and pride went hand in hand.

"The kings in this realm often had advisors to help ground their impulsiveness."

"And that is where I come into play." Lip lifting in a bitter sneer, he held a hand to his chest mockingly. "Where Thor gains a crown, I gain the honor of sitting at his right hand as his chief council. How fortunate I am."

Jealousy was one of Loki's core traits. Jane knew that from experience. It hadn't been very apparent
in the beginning, but since the late seventeenth century, it had become more pronounced. Saving her life multiple times, concern over how she lived, the quiet desperation in his tone in the midnight hours... for someone so good at keeping secrets, he could be very telling.

Even still, it wouldn't be wise to call too much attention to the matter, so her response erred on the side of caution, treading carefully. "Are you upset because you want the throne?"

His expression flickered in surprise. "No."

"Then I don't understand the problem." The hangnail was forsaken in favor of playing with the ends of her hair, a habit she'd picked up over the years whenever deep in thought. "Every king is going to have his issues, and after two millennia spent around each other, I'm sure your parents are fully aware of Thor's. That's why they would make you his advisor... because as his brother, you know his faults better than anyone."

"Perhaps, but there is only so much I can do to reign in his brash tendencies. Even my skill with words only goes so far." Jane took a couple steps closer, Loki eyeing her the entire time. "What's worse is the people's love for him. They worship him, adore him. If he sparks a futile war with another realm, they won't question the validity of it, only how soon they can leave for battle."

"Then that just reinforces your parents' decision."

Loki arched a brow, sarcastic. "Enlighten me."

"Without a kingdom, there can be no king. So while Thor may struggle with inter-realm relations, he'll have no trouble handling his own people. From what you say, everyone in Asgard looks up to Thor. He holds their affection, but you, Loki..." Jane finally stopped her approach to stand directly in front of him. "You'll hold their minds. It will be your words coming from Thor's mouth, your words that either rally or pacify them in times of trouble. And what's more is that they won't even know."

So slowly that she might not have noticed had she not been watching him so carefully, the resentment eased away. What remained was a smugness much more reminiscent of the Loki she knew.

Encouraged by the change in his countenance, Jane reached up and wound her arms around his neck. "Would you rather hold people's hearts or their minds?" It wasn't even a question worth answering, not when they both knew what he preferred, which explained why he side-stepped it completely.

"I'd rather the All-Father not make Thor king."

"Everything will be fine." She massaged away the tension at the nape of his neck. "But let's not talk about this anymore. I don't like seeing you all wound up. It's not... you."

Soothed by the motion of her fingers, Loki blinked leisurely. "A difficult feat." On the surface, he appeared to be relaxing, but then the ghost of a smirk that had hovered on his lips shifted into something a little more lecherous. "Maybe with a proper distraction..."

Unable to help herself, Jane chuckled and molded her body to his. "I can think of a few things that might distract you." And she didn't protest when his arms snuck around her waist and he lowered her to the ground.
"Come back with me."

The endless sea disappeared in the darkness of a blink, and when Jane opened her eyes again, they were focused on Loki. As he stared up into the sky, she studied the strong line of his jaw and the arching cheekbones from where she lay curled against his side, head pillowed on his shoulder, bare body protected from the weather by his heavy surcoat covering both of them.

"What?" As always, it was hard to think coherently after being intimate. Loki was notoriously skilled at scattering her thoughts.

"Come back with me." He spoke softly, words aimed at the sky instead of to her. The only thing that betrayed his hesitance, though, was the almost anxious insistency in the thumb rubbing her shoulder.

"To Asgard."

It was a monumental thing for anyone to request, much less Loki.

Jane had long since stopped trying to convince herself what the two of them shared was casual. They'd gone through too much, lived for too long with only each other as a constant, and there was something about having that much history together that only made their bond stronger. But even if things had been hinted at or murmured in the heat of the moment, they'd never really discussed how they felt, had never placed a label on what they had.

Until now.

Because Loki was doing exactly that by asking.

In the depths of his eyes, she could see all the things he'd been forced to confront – nervousness, vulnerability, want – and it stunned her, left her unsure of where they stood anymore. It was becoming harder and harder to see where the physical aspects of their relationship ended and the emotional began.

"I could…" She trailed off, flattening a hand against his chest and pushing herself up until she was propped up on one elbow. In spite of her mind insisting not to get carried away, her heart tripped a faster rhythm, excited. "You would take me with you?"

"Everything you could ever want for, I would provide." Loki finally met her gaze, carding his fingers through her hair and cupping the back of her head. "The most succulent food and drink ever to pass your lips, servants who would tend to your every whim, unlimited access to Asgard's greatest library, the chance to study the Bi-Frost at leisure... anything you desire. You could even continue attempting to unravel magic's secrets with your Midgardian science, futile as it may be."

Lips quirking, Jane breathed a laugh. It didn't matter where she was or how long it took, one day she would convince Loki that magic and science were one and the same. But maybe what she needed to accomplish that goal was Asgardian knowledge.

"Your presence would make the tediousness of my brother's ruling more bearable." A slight increase in pressure encouraged her to lower her head until their foreheads pressed together. "I could suffer his boorishness so long as you were there."

She leaned into the hand now cupping her cheek, watched his eyes close, breathed in his words and let them paint a picture in her mind.

"I would show you everything from the Mirrored Woods to the Great Sea, take you from the vale
beyond the wall to the mountain that touches the sky. We would stand at the end of the Rainbow Bridge where I could see the stars reflect in your eyes. Your days would be spent experiencing every splendor the Realm Eternal has to offer and your nights spent in my chambers… always with me, eternally by my side.”

A chill shivered up her spine. Her body sparked imagining what all would transpire through the nights while her nerves tingled with the possibilities of what would happen during the day. The number of options that would be opened to her if she were to agree was endless. So many of her questions could be answered, and she might finally be able to bridge the gap between magic and science.

"Well, Jane?" He angled his head to briefly press his lips to hers. "Will you return to Asgard with me?"

Part of her wanted to take his offer, run with it, and never look back – wanted to so badly that the allure of his proposal created an almost physical pain – but another part of her paused. She didn't even realize she'd been smiling until a sobering thought wiped it away.

"That sounds amazing." She nibbled at her lower lip. "Better than anything I could ever hope for."

Where anyone else would've taken what she'd said as a compliment, it was all too easy for an ever-perceptive Loki to read between the lines. "But?" The warmth from before was rapidly disappearing.

"Where's the catch?" Grey-green peeked from beneath lowered and knitted brows. "There has to be a drawback somewhere."

If Jane had learned anything from immortality, it was that if something appeared too good to be true, it probably was. Reality had made her too jaded to believe in happily ever after's. So the longer the seconds ticked out, the surer she was that something was being kept from her. Call it experience, call it a gut instinct… whatever it was, it had her retreating. It wasn't until she'd returned to her previous position propped up on one elbow that Loki relented, the admission coming out on a sigh.

"You would be in Asgard as my consort."

Whatever Jane had been expecting, that wasn't it.

"Consort?" She blinked. Swallowed. And because she couldn't believe what she'd heard was correct, repeated indignantly. "Consort?"

"I am a member of the royal family, Jane. The All-Father would never allow an official union between us." The matter-of-fact way Loki said it, as if that explanation was sufficient enough and she should just accept it without question, burned at her more than anything.

"Well, isn't that archaic." Face twisted in disgust, she scooted back, pulling the surcoat with her to simultaneously cover her nakedness and leave him bare to the world. "Were you planning on telling me that little bit of information before I made a decision or once I was already in Asgard?"

Nonplussed by her anger, Loki sat up and flicked a hand, their clothing returning in a shimmer of green. "So you're saying yes, then?"

"What… no, I'm not agreeing to that!" She spluttered, incensed, as she checked to make sure all her clothes were back before tossing aside his coat. "Do you even realize how demeaning that is?"

"I didn't realize you would be so offended by the idea." His gaze followed her as she abruptly stood and stepped off the blanket on which they'd been laying. "Many women would gladly be consort to
a prince."

Intimacy had borne a sense of companionship between them so strong it was easy to forget they weren't just two immortal lovers content to watch the ages pass from the comfort of each other's arms. But those were dangerous, idealistic thoughts because no matter how similar some of their circumstances might be, nothing could change the fact that they were vastly dissimilar beings.

Loki was the God of Mischief and Lies, a magic-user with the power to traverse realms and fight giants and conceal his actions from even the most watchful eyes, a prince of the Realm Eternal.

Jane was merely human.

And it was in moments like those – when he casually threw around his title, his station, and his power assuming it would impress her as it obviously impressed everyone else – that she was reminded of exactly how different they were. So instead of giving in, she crossed her arms and gave him a withering scowl.

"Well I'm not one of them."

The sky that had been clear blue was steadily darkening overhead, the breeze having pulled in thunderclouds that directly reflected Jane's mood. For a situation that had started out so beautifully, it was rapidly tumbling downhill.

"Don't you think you're overreacting?" Loki casually rearranged one of his vambraces, attention drifting back and forth between the intricately detailed metal and her. "The situation might not be ideal in your mind, but you would not be looked down on should you accept. It is a sound offer… and the best I can give you."

There was truth to his words, Jane knew that. She'd lived through enough time periods to recognize the difference between a consort and a common whore. What she didn't appreciate, though, was the backhanded way Loki had outlined his proposal.

Always so many secrets.

Always so many unanswered questions.

Always, always, always, she was left in the dark.

"But that's the thing… it wasn't your offer so much as how you approached it. How could you expect me to make an informed decision without all the information?" Jane studied his blank expression for a hint of understanding. "You can't ask someone to choose something like that while you're hiding away crucial details. It's not right."

Loki was the first to break their gaze, looking down as he stood and retrieved his surcoat from where it lay crumpled between them. "What would your answer have been had you known beforehand?"

"Is that the only thing you care about?" Before he could say anything, Jane continued, words like kindling that fed the tiny flame that was her anger. "The answer doesn't matter because I can't get past you keeping that from me." She ran a hand roughly through her hair. "It's like you were trying to bribe me into agreeing, telling me all these things you knew I'd want to hear, making it seem like the perfect situation when, in reality, it wouldn't be."

"That's not what I asked."

"Frustrating, isn't it, never getting your questions answered?" It was the first comment so far to draw
a reaction, and she savored the way his eyes narrowed. "What did you think would happen if I went with you and found out the terms later? You think I'd be fine with it, that I'd just overlook the fact that you essentially lied to get me to agree?"

The breeze had picked up into a steady wind, and it pulled a lock of hair across her face, the line of it cutting across Loki's body as he took one step towards her. "Answer the question."

"I don't think I really need to when you already know the answer."

The blanket disappeared as he crossed to her. "So that's it, then?" He stopped directly in front of her, forcing her to crane her head to hold his gaze. "No?"

"I don't want to be a bird trapped in a gilded cage." Refusing to be intimidated, Jane inched even closer, lessening the space between them. "I want to be more than someone's property."

Each word was enunciated carefully, keen-edged enough to wound, and her efforts were reflected in Loki's expression. There was no softness. There was no vulnerability. There wasn't even a careful emptiness. There was only a rigid tension caused by the bitter sting of rejection. He hid the hurt well, though, masking it behind his curled lip and a cruel smirk.

"Why?"

Confused, she frowned. "What do you mean why? What kind of life would that be?"

"You tell me, Jane." He straightened just enough to look down his nose at her. "After all, it wouldn't have been the first time you'd given up your honor for something, would it?"

Memories of taverns and ships and bargains of a licentious nature surged forth, the details so clear it was as if that period of her life was only yesterday and not three hundred years in the past. Loki knew the details of her time in the Caribbean. But even more important was that she could remember how upset he'd been after uncovering the truth of her and Captain Kidd's relationship.

Loki had told her it was wrong for her to have traded her body, wrong for her to have agreed to the captain's deal because she wasn't like the women he called on in Asgard, that she was more than someone's whore. But all it took was one simple question to contradict everything. With only a few simple words, he'd cheapened everything they shared from a relationship to a bargain, a negotiation, a mere exchange of goods. And for him to throw that decision in her face, to compare their current situation to a choice she'd had to make between the lesser of two evils, was a punch to her stomach, left her breathless aside from one bitter, bark of a laugh.

"Wow." Jane shook her head. "That was just… no, that's great. As if I needed anything else to convince me." Straightening her spine, she fixed him with the most unpleasant, most contemptible look she could muster. "Thank you, Loki, for your generous offer, but I'm afraid I have to decline. Although I wish you the best of luck dealing with your brother's upcoming coronation and any of the messes he might make in the centuries following it. I'm sure you'll manage just fine without me."

The response was thick with sarcasm and more than a little petty, but she was the past the point of caring. Her fury had taken hold, feeding off the heavy air around him, the precarious glint in his eyes.

Even still, her heart ached. It ached for the ruined friendship, the lost opportunities, the shattered relationship… because there was no going back. They had finally breached that line they'd skirted for centuries only for it to end in shambles, and the remains of what they'd been were scattered around them now, broken and fragmented.
Turning her back, Jane walked a few steps and sat down in a huff, mumbling to herself as she slipped on her shoes. "No wonder they decided to make Thor king."

A bolt of lightning illuminated the now overcast sky, but the rumbling thunder that followed did nothing to conceal Loki's voice. "What did you say?"

She hadn't meant for Loki to overhear her comment. However, there was no doubt that he had. There was too little confusion and too much warning in his question to be mistaken. In spite of that, she acted purely on impulse, speaking curtly and clearly over her shoulder.

"I said it's no wonder the rest of Asgard prefers Thor."

Jane felt him approaching even before his shadow fell across her, and she wasn't quite sure whether the chill that ran up her spine was from the lack of sun, the brisk wind, or the coldness in his voice. "You know nothing about him."

"I don't have to know him personally to know he's probably everything you're not. Why else would everyone praise his name and not yours?" Finished putting on her shoes, she stood and whirled around to face Loki. "I'm sure that if things were different and Thor cared for me, he wouldn't be content to downgrade me to the role of his consort or trick me into doing so. He'd fight for my honor instead of being a coward and hiding me away."

It took less than one second for Jane to realize she'd gone too far.

Loki's expression shifted from precarious irritation to outright anger, and her heart skipped a beat with the intensity of it, stomach plummeting in horrid realization. In one thousand years, not once had she seen such blatant malice on his face.

"If you think Thor to be a hero, that he would sweep you into his arms and forsake the throne for a Midgardian plaything, then you're more a fool than I imagined." In one smooth motion, Loki reached out to capture her arm in a vise-like grip. "You know nothing, and you have nothing, only your childish fantasies and notions of science. You're a dreamer. A thousand year old girl stuck in a twenty-eight year old body, frozen in time, immortalized in a reckless pursuit of knowledge."

With a furious grimace, she tried to jerk free, but he held fast, fingers digging painfully into the muscle. When she made one more attempt to pull away, he shook her so hard her teeth snapped down on the inside of her cheek.

"It's time to wake up, Jane. You want to see other realms? You wish to traverse space? Consider it granted."

The breath caught in her throat as he forced her perilously close to the edge of the cliff, but there wasn't enough time for her to yell or berate him, just open her mouth in the beginnings of an exclamation before the words were stolen away and replaced with the oxygen-less atmosphere of space-time.

Chapter End Notes

General fact for this chapter – Stora Karlsö is a tiny island off the coast of Gotland, Sweden. Aside from a restaurant, a museum, and a lighthouse where people can also spend the night, it’s mostly uninhabited, but offers spectacular views, trails, beaches, and
bird watching for people that choose to visit. It’s on my list of places to visit if I ever travel near Sweden again. Search some images and tell me it doesn’t look beautiful.

I know people’s opinions on Loki’s motivations throughout the movies vary, but I really believe his quest for a throne didn’t begin until the time between Thor and The Avengers. When you watch the deleted scene from Thor of when he’s made king, he seems genuinely shocked. Maybe that’s my own headcanon, but it’s what I’m going with here.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

I listen to a lot of music while writing. The genre usually varies, but this chapter really had me focusing on a specific set of songs. If you’re into that sort of thing, feel free to listen to the following while you read: ‘Time’ from the Inception soundtrack, ‘Captain America’ and ‘Natasha’ from the CA: The Winter Soldier soundtrack, and Birdy’s cover of ‘Shelter’. There are so many songs I associate with the different characters and situations throughout this story, so if you’re ever curious for more, let me know. I’m always willing to share!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifteen

“The promise never harvested in fallow fields shall lie, in a shallow grave of stubble field and half-remembered lies. A burning heart deceived me and you really put me on, but now you’re gone, gone, gone.”

2001: Sweden

Part Two

Loki had once said that the longer the path, the more intense the transition would be.

The frequent trips he’d taken her on over the years had helped to acclimate her to the effects of his preferred method of travel. Where it used to leave her weak or boneless, it now left her with a mild sense of nausea and a dull headache, both of which were quick to fade. However, that generalization apparently only applied to travel within her realm because this time was nothing like what she was used to.

The air was heavy and dense, pressing into her with a force so much stronger and so much worse than anything she’d ever experienced. It felt like her head was being crushed, like her ribcage would cave in at any moment, like her lungs were shriveling into dried and useless husks. She was a supernova, but she didn't know if she was exploding in a dizzying array of light or collapsing inward to form a singularity at the heart of herself.

Maybe it was neither.

Maybe it was both.

Time had no meaning. Not anymore. They might have been stuck in the inky blackness of space-time for five seconds or five minutes, five hours or five days, five years or five centuries. And she
was just beginning to wonder if she'd somehow died without even knowing and been transported to Hel instead of Valhalla when the pressure suddenly eased.

Jane's lungs expanded, sucking in the newfound oxygen in large, greedy gasps, but the decompression left her lightheaded, the abrupt onslaught of colors blurring indistinctly. How or when it happened, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that when she came back to herself, she was on her knees, leaning heavily against Loki's legs with her forehead pressed to his thigh.

The mess of colors slowly separated, but darkness continued to hover at the edges of her sight, ready and waiting for the opportunity to claim her consciousness. Nevertheless, she refused to let it take her under, and it was by sheer strength of will that she blinked, mentally shook herself, and refocused on the smooth material of Loki's pants instead. After a few seconds of steady breathing, she'd regained enough control to turn her head… only when it did, her body followed.

Thrown off balance, Jane rotated until she was sitting on the ground. Under her cheek was the supple leather of Loki's pants; against her shoulder, the hard line of his shinbone. And she didn't even realize she'd fallen onto his boot until he pulled it out from beneath her with a sharp motion.

The sudden loss of support that was his leg had her falling again, hand sliding through dirt and grass without gaining traction, and she only stopped when her shoulder reconnected with his shin. It wasn't his leg that held her upright, though. No, it was the hand still clasped firmly around her arm that kept her from collapsing into an undignified heap.

"What's wrong, Jane? Feeling ill?"

Both questions were completely unnecessary. Jane knew that Loki was fully aware of his actions, of just how severely the inter-realm travel would affect her. Even if she didn't know, the sneer that was evident in his voice spoke volumes, the cruel edge to it making her insides knot uncomfortably.

She'd pushed him too far. Now she was paying the price.

"Stand up." Loki jerked her arm. "Stand and lay eyes on the realms you've dreamt of seeing for so long."

Jane tried. Really, she did. But when she gathered her legs beneath her, they remained limp and unsupportive, left her crumpling back against him with a pained noise. Still, the pain of her knees slamming into the dirt was nothing compared to the pain in her shoulder when Loki unceremoniously hauled her to her feet.

His hands were firm as they grasped both of her arms, fully supporting her weight as she swayed on weak legs and eventually sagged back against his chest. The edge of his surcoat brushed her fingers, and she immediately latched on, eager to hold onto something steady in an attempt to ground herself. However, just as quickly as she'd grabbed the material, it was ripped from her hands, forcing her to clench them around the empty air at her side.

Loki leaned forward until his mouth was beside her ear, her hair fluttering with his breath. "Behold Vanaheim."

It was with considerable effort that Jane focused on the sight before her. They stood on a cliff similar to the one on Stora Karlsö, only this one offered a spectacular view of a forested valley instead of a sparkling sea. The woods stretched on for miles, so far that they eventually merged into one formless impression, but in the center of the valley was a clearing. At one end sat a lake with water so clear she could practically see the fish swimming in the depths even from their distance. At the other end was a village.
Mahogany structures crafted in the likeness of the Vikings dotted the area, and the familiar sight shot an instant pang through Jane's chest. It was so easy, falling into the memory. If she ignored everything else, she could walk the paths of the past as clearly as if it were yesterday.

Smoke curled from her family's chimney, men collected firewood in preparation for the upcoming winter, children ran circles around the buildings… if she tried, she could almost smell the roasted boar cooking on the spit.

It wasn't just the view or the memories that left Jane speechless, though. The lights, the colors, the very air she was breathing… all of it was more vibrant, brighter, cleaner, purer. There was no haze of pollution to dilute the sky or smog of civilization to dull the sights, and she reveled in it. She hadn't even realized how tainted her realm had become until she was staring purity in the face.

But her revelry wasn't meant to last.

Jane was still trying to take in all the sights when they disappeared, dissolved into the inky darkness of space-time. What little air she'd managed to take in was ripped away in one quick swipe, leaving her lungs achingly empty and her head fuzzy. Really, it was probably a blessing. If she had air to breathe, she probably would've cried out at the pressure that was slowly compacting her bones into dust.

When the ground materialized beneath their feet, Loki released her, not even flinching when she stumbled a few steps before falling to her hands and knees. The world reeled, but Jane swallowed down the bile that had risen to the back of her throat, sat back onto her heels, and weakly lifted her head.

It was a grey world.

A dead world.

Gritty sand darkened the undersides of her nails and dug into her knees even through her jeans. It felt like crushed glass, like remnants of a shattered star, and no matter where she looked, it spread out in a sea of despondency, an endless wasteland of cold grey and muddy green. Even the sky provided no relief. Whatever sun hung in the firmament was hidden beneath banks of clouds, dimly lit and darkly ominous.

A vicious wind picked up, whipped her hair around so fiercely the strands stung her face. When it died down, she wiped a hand across one cheek to ease the sting only for it to come back smudged with ash.

"Svartalfheim." Loki's voice rang out, eerily loud in the abandoned world. "One-time land of the dark elves."

It was a stark contrast to the nature-filled splendor of Vanaheim. Where one showcased grass and trees, the other offered only sand and rocks. Where one was vibrant, the other was muted. Where one was brimming with life, the other was filled with death.

"Are you not entertained?" Jane turned just far enough to see Loki out of the corner of her eye, watched him step forward to stand directly behind her. "Is this not what you wanted?"

Without warning, he leaned over just enough to fist one hand in the back of her shirt, and then the colors were bleeding into each other, grey to black to white, Svartalfheim to space-time to…

"Alfheim."
A waterfall to her left rained diamonds down into the narrow river that flowed in front of her. No, not diamonds… Jane blinked the increasing moisture from her eyes to see it was only water transformed into precious stones by the brilliant sunlight. Across the river, trees with silver bark and gold foliage climbed into the sky, towered so high that they pierced the white sun. And letting her head fall back, she listened to the water babble around copper rocks as she stared into a nickel sky interspersed with brass clouds and bronze birds.

But then the warm breeze was replaced with one so bitingly cold that Jane wondered if she'd ever be warm again… wasn't sure what it felt like to have ever been warm… forgot what warm even meant.

"Jötnheim."

This time when Loki released her, he also gave a slight push that sent her back to her hands and knees. The trace amounts of moisture on her fingertips froze to the frigid ground beneath them just as the tears clinging to her eyelashes hardened into ice.

"Does this not thrill you, Jane?" Gasping for air against the cold, she looked up and out to an icy, sapphire world. "Is it not exciting to travel between realms, having craved it for centuries on end?"

Words failed her. All she could manage was a halting shake of her head because she may have been thrilled by the thought of travelling between realms, but none of her imaginings had ever included the punishing Loki who now accompanied her, who stood idly by as she struggled for breath and consciousness and life.

The ground was painfully cold beneath her knees, but it felt unsettlingly normal under her hands. They'd gone completely numb, had been that way for some time. Balancing on one, she glanced at the pale white skin of the other before cradling it to her chest in an attempt to regain some feeling, but her core was just as frozen as the rest of the realm.

There was no heat left in her.

And the colder she got, the less she felt it.

The shaking ceased, the ache in her bones slipp'd away. In its wake, there was nothing but the human-shaped sculpture that was Jane, the dark spots that danced across her sight like dying snowflakes, and the ice-edge of the wind that smelled like steel.

She closed her eyes to block out the harsh world, but when she opened them again, it was to a world just as harsh. Blue gave way to red, numbing cold to blistering heat, and she knew which realm they were in before Loki could even say it.

"Muspelheim."

It was dangerous of Loki to take them there at all, but it was undeniably foolhardy when one took into account their past experiences with the fire giants. Whatever the reason for the bad blood between the jötnar and the God of Mischief, she doubted time had lessened their thoughts of revenge even if they'd been mysteriously absent from her life for the past half-century. Muspelheim was not a good place for them to be.

But all her worries were pushed aside as the pressure that had been steadily building in her head with each step through space reached its peak. There was a moment of white-hot pain, a split-second of something that felt like death… then she was vomiting up the contents of her stomach.

It was red when it covered the igneous rock over which she was hunched. It was red when it splashed onto the pale, clammy skin of her hands. It was red when it caught in the strands of hair that
fell into her face. And while her stomach cramped and screamed in protest, Jane idly wondered if it was red because of the crimson-tinted world or because she was bleeding from some internal wound caused by the unrelenting stress of inter-realm travel.

The toe of Loki's boot nudged against her thigh. "Come now, Jane. On your feet."

"I…" The words caught in the raw scratchiness of her throat and her muscles that had long since liquefied into mush refused to cooperate. "I can't…"

"But you must." Loki sounded vindictively upbeat as he looped his arms under hers and pulled her to her feet. "After all, this is what you've desired." Unsteady, Jane staggered until her back met his chest. Only when she was relatively secure against him did he grasp her chin and force her head up. "Look upon the worlds you've wanted so badly to see."

Her eyes watered, snot dripped from her nose, and her mouth still tasted of vomit, but she couldn't help but take in the deadly realm.

Across the horizon, lava spewed from the center of volcanic mountains and rolled down their charred sides into rivers of fire. Where there wasn't lava, the ground was like charcoal, brittle and cracked from years upon years of unbearable heat, and above the land, the sky was ablaze with a setting sun.

For a long while, Jane could only stand there in the cage of Loki's arms. Then she felt a familiar energy ignite her will, breathe life back into her indomitable spirit, and she pushed away from him with a violent shove. With everything in her possession, she fought for balance and leveled him with a glare.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" The blasé expression he wore was made even worse by his unassuming tone.

"You know damn well what." Jane swayed a bit but managed to remain standing on her own as she frowned. "I get it, you're upset with me, but I don't understand what you're trying to prove."

"I'm just giving you what you've always wanted."

"But why?" Time had taught her that Loki didn't do anything on impulse. There was always some reason, some end-goal in mind that drove his actions. So what was his motivation now? Other than taking her through the realms just because he knew the adverse effects it would have on her, it didn't make sense. "After all this time, why now?"

It was no surprise, though, when Loki neatly side-stepped the question. It would've been more surprising to actually receive an answer.

"Seeing that you've desperately sought this very thing for centuries, one would think you'd be more appreciative. How ungrateful you are." The distance between them lessened as he took a couple steps forward. "Thanklessness… it's the trademark of the human race."

Loki eyed her from head to foot, lip curling in a way that said exactly what he thought of her in that moment. To him, she was smaller than small. She was insignificant. Useless. Human. But that didn't prevent her from breathing a disbelieving laugh.

"You expect me to be grateful for your complete lack of respect and consideration. That sounds about right." Jane met his slow advance halfway. "I wanted to travel to other realms, but not like this. Pushed around, taken to places without any time to recover… it's unnecessarily cruel after everything we've been through." Anger at his condescension, his arrogance, his patronization burned at her, and
The push forced Loki back a step.

Then again, forced was probably an exaggeration. Most likely, he hadn't even really felt the impact. If the frown knitting his brows together was any indication, it wasn't so much her strength that made him step back as it was shock that she would strike out at him. Several centuries had passed since the last time she'd dared to do so. He recovered quickly, though. Tucking all traces of astonishment behind the dangerous glint in his eyes, he lowered his chin.

"It would serve you well to be careful, Jane." The dark void of his gaze was made even darker when a volcanic eruption flashed bright red behind her, and she could almost see the reflection of the magma in their obsidian depths. "You tread on dangerous ground."

"Yeah, well, when haven't I?"

Jane spun on her heel, turning her back on Loki. Chest heaving with a poisonous mix of frustration, pride, and adrenaline, she wanted nothing more than to stalk away, forget about magic and gods and immortality and all the things that complicated her life. But the scorched expanse that stretched out before her wouldn't let her forget, and she wasn't so blinded by her anger as to walk into a realm filled with creatures that had shadowed her for centuries.

The sharp taste of iron filled her mouth, and she released the lip she hadn't even realized she'd been biting. With a sniff, she swept the back of her hand across her nose, wiping away the snot that was still trying to slide down her lip.

When was the last time she and Loki had argued like this?

Their past was riddled with disagreements, but… had they ever argued like this?

No, they hadn't, and the realization was a painful awareness, one Jane felt acutely. After all the time they'd spent together, she would've thought them to be past the petty arguments and the hurtful jabs and the vengeful actions. But one soured conversation founded on a rare moment of vulnerability was all it took for a thousand years of progress to be cast aside.

Reason insisted to take the brief respite she'd earned, use it to bring the argument to a close and patch the wounds they'd created with silence until they could mend. It would've been the wise thing to do. But she was in too deep. She was captivated by the train wreck, stuck in the mire of a situation she'd unintentionally started.

Pride was pulling her down into the depths.

And she didn't need water to feel like she was drowning.

So there they stood. With the rage of battle glittering in their eyes, they remained at each other's throats, teeth clamped tight on the jugular, savoring the blood their comments drew.

"You wish to know why I took you through the realms?" Loki spoke softly, but his voice was laced with callousness and spite, hard-edged in its quietness. "It was so I could watch your hope die."

Jane stared unseeingly at a boulder as it shifted, tipped, and then fell into a stream of lava. It sunk slowly, but not until it had disappeared into the depths did she blink and turn back to face Loki, an unspoken inquiry written on her face.

"How can science fold the space between the realms? How can science trump the force that has held
Yggdrasil together since the beginning of time? It can't." When Loki shifted, the burnished line of gold that crossed his chest caught the dim light around them and was stained red. "Magic reveals its deepest secrets to no one. Not even me. Least of all, science."

He spat the word like it was a contaminated thing, bitter and acrid on his tongue, and her mouth tightened into a thin line in response.

"I did this to you so you can finally see there is no possibility of you ever succeeding, that all your efforts have been for naught." In just a few long strides, he was in front of her, smothering her in the long streak of his shadow as she craned her neck to hold his heated gaze. "I wanted to watch the light of those foolish dreams fade from your eyes."

"You know, I thought you'd changed after all these years, but you haven't changed one bit." Jane's attention flicked back and forth between Loki's eyes. "You're still the same selfish person I met in the beginning, lording over everyone like the god you believe yourself to be, playing with people's lives for fun, like it's some kind of sick game. The first time I saw you, I thought you were death, but I was wrong." She shook her head slightly. "You're nothing more than a monster."

A muscle in his jaw jumped. "You used to think me your savior."

"Maybe you were at one time."

"And now?" Loki's lips curled into a mocking sneer. "What am I now, then, to you?"

But just as Jane opened her mouth to issue a scathing nothing in retort, the ground shook beneath them. The tremor shivered through the hardened rock as easily as it shivered up her spine, and it was a survival instinct, the primal fear of soon-to-be prey, that gripped her. It told her to run, to hide, to leave and never come back… and she knew without knowing how that their presence had not gone unnoticed.

They'd lingered for too long, and now they'd been found out.

The ground was still quaking when a roar filled the air. It came from nowhere and everywhere at the same time, leaking out of volcanoes, creeping along the fissures in the earth. It slunk under her skin like a disease that would consume her from the inside out and settled in the empty spaces in her chest to feast on her trembling heart.

Jane looked to the left, to the right, and to the left again. The only movement was that of the magma spewing forth, the rivets of lava that snaked across the land, the ash raining down from the sky to paint their hair and shoulders grey. She searched desperately for the source of the noise while Loki's attention remained fixated on her, focus never straying. Then she saw it.

A slight shift on the horizon…

A small avalanche of rock…

A ripple in a lake of lava…

And then a whole mountain moved.

But as the peak opened into a gaping maw and the ridge turned into the slope of twin horns and the dips in the land turned into the muscles of an arm and the entire form rose up to blot out the already dim sky, Jane realized she wasn't looking at a mountain at all.

Throughout her life, she'd learned a wide variety of languages — Norse, Spanish, Russian, Arabic,
English, French, Chinese, German – but not a single one of them contained a word that could adequately describe the enormity of the fire giant.

On their mid-level plateau, mountains towered over Jane and Loki, but the fire giant towered above the mountains. One clawed hand would be enough to crush even the tallest building in Midgard without any effort. With a single step, he could flatten a small town. And when the head lifted to look out onto his realm, the horns curled so high into the cloudbank, Jane thought they might impale whatever dying sun hung behind them.

"We have to leave."

She started to step around Loki, but his hands darted out to grasp her upper arms, effectively snagging her attention and stilling her movements. "No, we're not finished here."

"Are you insane?" Wide brown eyes flicked between narrowed grey-green ones. "We can continue this later, but if we don't get out of here soon, he's going to—"

"Lie-smith!" The sheer volume of the fire giant's call made Jane jump and clench her teeth against the reverberations that rattled her bones. "After all this time…"

Wind blasted against her face, so hot she thought it would singe her lungs, and she reached up to grasp Loki's forearms without thinking. Her fingernails scratched against the smooth vambraces before finding an edge to curl around. "What did I tell you? We need to go now!"

"How brave of you to wander into my grasp once more."

"Not yet." Loki seized her jaw, forcing her focus back to him. "I want to know what I am because you seem confused."

"Or perhaps you're just foolish…"

"Am I a murderer or a savior?"

"Especially when you've returned bearing the property you took from us."

"A monster or a man?"

"Any being who steals from Surtur is one that invites death."

"Tell me, Jane!"

"You're a child!"

Silence welled between them, so loud it rang in her ears, deafening in its noiselessness. In the background, the fire giant's voice continued to boom through the realm, but all the threats fell on deaf ears. A horde of minions could've descended on them and they wouldn't have fought back. In that moment, there was nothing but Jane, Loki, and the echo of her retort hovering in the air around them.

His fingers twitched, tightened, dug in hard enough to bruise, and when he spoke, he was quiet. Threateningly quiet. Dangerously quiet. "What?"

"You heard me." An earthquake wracked the world as the jötun took a step that would span a mid-sized town. "I reject your offer because you try to trick me into it and how do you respond? By taking me through the realms in the most painful way possible all to demonstrate the inferiority of science compared to magic. If that's not childish, I don't know what is. And that isn't even taking
She hadn’t meant to bring up the initial source of Loki’s foul mood, but it shoved its way out unbidden.

"It’s just been announced that your brother – your only brother – is the heir apparent and will be crowned King of Asgard, and all you can do is play at righteous indignation citing the good of the realm when, really, it’s because you’re jealous."

"I’m not jealous." Voice low, Loki shifted closer.

The tremors continued, one after another after another as the fire giant stepped over mountain ranges and reservoirs of lava to make his way in their direction. However, they somehow ignored the approaching death, too wrapped up in their attacks on each other.

"Do you even believe what you’re saying?" Jane snorted a hollow laugh. "You’re just tired of living in your brother's shadow."

"Thor isn’t ready!"

"And neither are you!" Leaning into the hand still gripping her jaw, she stretched as close as she could to his face without standing on her tiptoes. "If Thor is ruled by his pride and ambition, then you are ruled by your emotions because for someone who plays at being cold and uncaring, you care an awful lot. Trust me, I know. You revealed enough of that when you asked me to go with you."

Jane was a physically powerless human wielding incredibly powerful words, and the sting of them was apparent in Loki's eyes. He was caught, trapped in their painful snare. But an ensnared God of Mischief was a dangerous one. It was something she understood quite well, something that would only end with retaliation.

For someone so in control, she was so at mercy.

She was still waiting for what Loki would do next when the earthquakes ceased and they were thrown into shadow. The overbearing heat of the realm had caused sweat to bead on her forehead and drip down the valley between her shoulder blades, but the sudden darkness was bone-chilling. It was the only thing imperative enough to pull her attention from Loki’s eyes.

Looking up, Jane gaped at the sheer might of the fire giant. Those that she'd encountered in Russia and Italy had been impressive enough, but this… it was indescribable.

"I can sense it…" Without distance to help alleviate it, the volume had her staggering into Loki's chest. "It calls to me…"

Up close, she could see all the things that both fascinated and horrified her in flawless detail - the knobs and knurls that decorated the twin horns that arched far behind him and the smaller ones that curled around his face, pointed canines that were longer than she was tall, old-world style battle regalia made from the hide and bones of enemies draped around his neck and cascading down his back, skulls of fallen warriors affixed to the strap around his waist and the armor covering his knees.

His body was all coal and iron and ages-old power, and there was no mistaking it.

The fire giant could only be Surtur.

A clawed hand lifted to draw a bladeless hilt from his side, and Jane watched as liquid fire bled from the glowing lines that interspersed his arm and transformed into a flaming sword. "Return to me that
Surtur held the blade aloft, staring down at them with glowing eyes that seemed to burn into her very soul, and Jane just knew they were going to die. But as the sword began to fall towards them, Muspelheim wavered, disappeared, and reworked itself into the open expanse of Stora Karlsö.

Waves crashed on the rocks below while lightning and thunder from the storm that had blown in crashed through the sky overhead, but Jane swore she could hear an echo accompany them through space-time, a murky laugh issued in the moments before they escaped and a promise – *run while you can, Lie-smith* – the last promise from a vengeful jötun.

The adrenaline was slow to leave her quivering limbs, but when it did, she realized Loki’s hands were no longer on her arms. In fact, he was several feet away, hands clasped behind his back. She stared at his motionless form for a moment before stepping forward.

"Thank you for—"

"You think you know me, Jane?"

Loki smoothly cut her off. The encounter with Surtur had completely banished all thoughts of their argument from her mind, but judging by his cold expression, they were still very much at the forefront of his.

"You think you know my family?" The rage, the fury, the anger… all of it was gone, but she almost would've preferred it to the deadened timbre that had replaced it. "What do you know about family when yours is dead, every single one of them, buried in a barren wilderness along with the rest of your people?"

"Loki—" She tried again only to be cut short for the second time.

"Wasn't that your father on the ground the day we met, eyes glassy, sliced open from pelvis to sternum? Wasn't it his blood that covered your hands? His last breath upon your cheek? And now there aren't even bones, not even a shallow grave. There's nothing but a half-forgotten memory." When she took another step forward, his form shimmered and reappeared farther back. "I was the only unchanging thing in your world of constant change, and now you won't even have that."

The declaration stopped her in her tracks. "What do you mean?" Her stomach was tense with a sensation that had nothing to do with the aftereffects of inter-realm travel.

"What will you do now that you have nothing?"

"No, Loki…"

"How will you cope when you're all alone?"

"Please don't leave…"

The rest of the plea on her lips didn't spill forth, only dissolved into a sound that was half-yell, half-cry as she sprinted towards Loki. But when she reached out to grab hold of his surcoat, her hands slid through him in a shimmer of gold and green. And she was too busy looking over her shoulder to the fading image to prevent her toe from catching in a crack in the ground.

She pitched forward, saw nothing but stormy sky, and absentmindedly focused on the one clear patch through all the roiling thunderheads in the split-second before she connected with the ground and her head exploded in a kaleidoscope of pain.
It was dark.

So very, very dark.

If light was life, then surely this had to be death because she could feel it, the suffocating and paralyzing darkness that went on and on without end. She was dying by degrees. There was a gash in her thigh… a knife pressed to her throat… a fire dissolving her bones… a hunger gnawing at her belly… a clawed hand extended out towards her…

But she couldn't die.

Or could she?

Wind howled in the distance, sluicing around the mountain crags and through the narrow valleys, gliding over the waves on the sea. It was a wolf on the hunt for its next kill and then it wasn't because there was an underlying rhythm, a steady beat, the \textit{whump whump whump} of a drum, a heart, her heart.

Her heart that wouldn't stop beating.

Or would it?

The world was a monochrome shadow, all black on black on black, and the blackness stretched out in a hundred thousand variations of the same color that weren't variations at all but a tempestuous display of sameness. But in the eye of the storm, the shadows bled out, seeped down the sides of the world until she was floating in a sea of stars, drowning in a liquid sky.

But she wouldn't drown.

Or would she?

There was a touch on the back of her hand. And there were voices. Calling, asking, laughing, yelling, crying… they cut through the wind and the heartbeat in a jumbled mess. Bits and pieces registered, but they danced the border of fact and fiction, memory and imagination, in an almost playful manner as everything echoed in her mind.

Her mind that knew the words.

Or did it?

Female; approximately twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old; head trauma – \textit{You haven't changed a bit over the years} – Suffering from a skull fracture on the right side, subdural hematoma and contusion at the side of impact, and cerebral edema in the surrounding areas – \textit{I was safeguarding my investment} – She's lost a lot of blood – \textit{When did everything become so complicated}? – Do you know who she is? – \textit{You are all mine} – Was she awake when you found her? – \textit{I burn for you} – Did she speak to you at all? – \textit{Do you believe in fate}? – I'm going to have to ask you to wait here – \textit{Do you}? – Take her to ICU – \textit{Do you}?

And for a moment there was something.

And then there was nothing.
Chapter End Notes

No real facts for this chapter, but if you’d like to see where I got the inspiration for the fire giants, and especially Surtur, check out Sam Burley’s piece here. It’s mind-blowingly incredible, as are all of his other works that I scanned through. Go check it out!

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

And now for the third and final part to the Sweden ordeal. This chapter is quite a bit shorter than the other two but marks a transition point in the story that will be explained more in the second author’s note at the end. Music recommendations for this chapter: ‘Unbreakable’ from the Unbreakable soundtrack and ‘Mako’ from the Pacific Rim soundtrack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen

“The eyes are not here. There are no eyes here in this valley of dying stars, in this hollow valley, this broken jaw of our lost kingdoms.”

2001: Sweden

Part Three

Waking up felt a lot like being born. At least, that was what Jane imagined being born would feel like, because when consciousness returned, it was in the accompaniment of bright fluorescent lighting, a soft beeping, and the harsh smell of antiseptic. That, and a persistent pounding in the recesses of her head.

Breathing deeply, she twitched her fingers, curled them around the fabric they rested on, but when she felt a slight pull on her skin, she slowly opened her eyes. There was tape on the back of her hand and, from underneath, a long tube that led to a fluid-filled bag beside her head. An IV. In a daze, she stared at the bag and the steady drip of liquid until a flash of color caught her eye.

"Oh, you're finally awake."

Jane's head snapped to the side so quickly that her headache surged, the pain sliding down her throat and into her stomach where it threatened to yank out its contents and empty them all over the sheets. Wincing, she laid a hand over her abdomen and tried to focus on the figure unfurling from the chair to her left instead of the nauseous roiling in her stomach.

She squinted and blinked until her sight sharpened and she could make out the middle-aged man standing beside the bed. "Where am I?"
"You're at Vårdcentral Klinte, the hospital in Klintehamn." The names jangled in her mind, almost familiar but not quite. "You've been in and out for the past few days. How are you feeling?"

Days?

Jane frowned, eyes drifting over the man's shoulder to a blank spot on the wall.

Had she really been in the hospital for that long?

"I've been better." As if to remind her of how far she was from better, the pressure in her head swelled. For a moment, the pain took her breath away. It pounded in time with her heart, each beat so hard she expected her skull to split open at any moment. As quickly as the pain had increased, though, it tapered off. "It could always be worse, I suppose."

Pressing the heel of one hand to her temple in an attempt to ease the dull ache, she was surprised to find a bandage there. It wasn't at all what she was expecting, but it offered at least some explanation as to her headache. Carefully, she fingered the wrapping, followed it the entire circumference of her skull, felt the particularly tender spot on the back.

"The doctors said a fracture and a hematoma as bad as yours would've killed most people. Left them in a coma, at best." The man chuckled, and Jane peeked up at him, taking in the thinning hair, kind eyes, and easy smile. "You sure are a lucky one."

A fracture…

A hematoma…

The swallow stuck in her throat. Avoiding his gaze, Jane fumbled with the buttons on the bed's railing, trying to find the one that would raise the bed, but when the man reached over to help after her fourth unsuccessful attempt, she snatched her hand back. It wasn't until the bed had shifted her into a more or less sitting position that she felt confident enough to speak.

"I don't believe we've met." She took in his attire – a faded sweater that had been through about ten-too-many washes, a pair of jeans with grass stains on one knee, and scuffed hiking boots – with a critical eye. "Are you a doctor?"

"Not me." Offering her another genial smile, he shook his head. "No, I'm a scientist. My name is Erik Selvig."

There wasn't the same level of sincerity in her returning smile, but Jane issued it nevertheless. "It's nice to meet you, Erik. I…" She hesitated. "I don't suppose you could fill me in on what happened?"

He took a deep breath, chin dipping and teeth worrying his bottom lip as if unsure whether or not he should tell her, but then he exhaled any of the reservations he might have had. "I'd been on the northeast side of Stora Karlsö doing some research for almost a week. Since most of my work was done at night, I'd usually go for a hike during the day. It was luck, really, that I even stumbled across you. Normally, I'd stick to the same routes, but my backpack tore that afternoon so I had to take a shortcut back to the tent."

The chair scraped against the tile floor as Erik pulled it closer to the bed, sat back down, and leaning forward, rested his elbows on his knees. His eyes were fixed on the blanket covering her legs, but the empty look in them was unmistakable. It was obvious he was seeing something other than the polyester fibers.

"Scared me half to death when I saw you, laid out on the ground with your face covered in blood."
A shudder worked its way through his shoulders. "I thought you were dead."

Jane stared at Erik, entranced, mouth hanging slightly open, breath shallow and fast.

"I called the paramedics right away, and they sent a helicopter to airlift us out. It was the only option, seeing how we were in the middle of nowhere. The doctors only release details of an injury to family so they wouldn't tell me much at first, just that you were unconscious as a result of the head injury you'd sustained. Pointless, really… I figured that much out for myself." Still looking a little affronted, he shook his head. "It wasn't until you'd stabilized that they told me you were suffering from a skull fracture and a hematoma."

The knowledge that Stora Karlsö was a sparsely inhabited island surfaced from the hazy depths of her mind. If the situation was as bad as Erik made it out to be, he was probably the only reason she was still alive. Further details on her injury, however, could wait for later.

"Thank you for helping me."

Pulled from his thoughts, Erik blinked and looked from the blanket to her. "Of course. That was a nasty fall you took, and I wasn't about to leave you out there, Miss…” The title trailed on in a hiss as he snagged the clipboard from the end of the bed. "Doe."

Jane held out a hand in a silent request, brows knitted together in confusion. "Doe?" A quick perusal of the documents revealed unknown to be typed into almost every blank of information. The only ones that had been filled in were the name, sex, age, weight, and height.

"Jane Doe." Her eyes snapped to his over the top of the clipboard. "No one knew who you were and there weren’t any forms of identification on you so that's what they've been calling you until someone tells the doctors otherwise."

A corrected name – something foreign and strange, both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time – hovered on the tip of her tongue, but she bit back the response, trapped it behind the audible click of her teeth when her mouth snapped closed. And the longer she thought about her name, the more strongly she felt about the only other one that came to mind.

"Foster." She held his gaze, firm and steady, as she handed the clipboard back. "My name is Jane Foster."

"Jane Foster, hm?" An arched eyebrow was the only sign of his skepticism. "Not many people around here have a westernized name like that. Those that do don't speak Swedish nearly as well as you. If I'd have guessed, I would've said you were native to the area."

Confused expression shifting into a full-blown frown, Jane's attention slid to the side to stare blankly at the wall opposite her. Swedish? She'd been speaking… Swedish? And fluently, no less. Naturally. The taste of everything she'd uttered so far remained in her mouth, the ease with which the words had come.

At a loss, she mumbled, this time in halting English. "I'm sorry, did you say I fell?"

Erik smiled faintly but didn't comment on the transition, only answered her back in English as well. "That's what the doctors have been saying. The contusions on your head were consistent with the rock located at the sight. There were no signs of assault, so they're assuming you tripped and fell."

"I fell?"

"Yes." In her peripheral vision, Erik nodded. "You've been unconscious for three days."
"Three days?"

"Yes." Ever patient, he repeated and nodded again. "The only thing the doctors couldn't explain was your hand."

One of his fingers pointed over her body, and she slowly followed it to her right hand. The skin covering the back of her hand was smooth and unblemished, nothing of any importance to note, but when she rotated it, she was stunned to see her palm a pale white and the pads of her fingers covered in blisters.

"It's frostbite. Nothing severe, probably second-degree at best, but virtually unheard of around here during the summer months." Jane gaped at the swollen flesh, registered the faint numbness that had gone unnoticed until then. "It's fresh too… that's the real mystery. The doctor said it couldn't have occurred more than a couple hours before I found you."

Something wasn't right.

"There was also ash in your hair." Erik gestured towards the locks curling over her shoulders. "The helicopter blew most of it away but there was quite a bit of it at first. I don't know where you'd been, but it must have been one hell of a campfire."

Panic, strong and fierce and real, began to well up. It slunk through her stomach, seized her racing heart in an iron grip, and crowded the space around her lungs to the point she couldn't breathe. She opened her mouth and felt the rush of oxygen glide down her throat, but it didn't reach her lungs. Some clinical portion of her mind – probably the same place that knew a foreign name and spoke Swedish – acknowledged that she was on the verge of having an anxiety attack.

"Do you remember anything about what happened?"

"I was…" Struggling to inhale around the tightness in her chest, Jane had to fight tooth and nail for every word. "I don't… I'm not…" But she couldn't breathe. "I can't…"

Erik laid a comforting hand on her forearm. "You don't remember." Relieved, she shook her head, felt a few miniscule fragments of the panic start to slip away. "That's not uncommon with head injuries. People forget the moment right before the injury for a while, but things usually come back later. I'm sure you'll remember everything soon."

Then Jane paused…

"But anyway, you can talk to the doctors more about that later. The important thing is to find out your emergency contacts."

And what little breath she'd regained rushed out in a heavy exhale…

"Husband? Parents? Friends? Who should we contact?"

Jane's attention darted back to Erik's, headache rolling with the sudden movement. She tried to remember, to dig into the obscure depths of her brain and pull out something – anything – but the farther she searched and the deeper she dug, the blacker it got. There was nothing. No family, no friends, no job, no past, no life. Nothing at all.

"Jane?"

Yes, her name was Jane Foster. That much, she knew.
But everything else… everything else was blank.

“This is the way the world ends – not with a bang but with a whimper.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus ends the first of three arcs. I’m sad to say goodbye to the history-hopping section of this story since that was one of the most exciting parts for me to plan, but I’m eager to move forward into the second arc. In it, the characters will begin to weave in and out of the events of the Marvel movie-verse we all know and love.

Also, for those of you that might not remember all the details, the Iðunn apple only granted Jane immortality, not immunity, which means that she is fully capable of dying, just not from old age. The head injury she sustained really was a close brush with death.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run… you know you want to.
Alright all you lovely, amazing, fantastic readers, let’s get arc two underway. We’ll have a bit of a lull before meeting up with the events of the first Thor movie. Once again, I don’t claim to be an expert on anything related to physics or astrophysics or science in general. I just do a lot of research and try to understand it the best I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Seventeen

“We were strangers when we met, and we were strangers when you left.”

Clouds highlighted the sky in brushstroke wisps as Jane walked through the empty field, ice-blue when hidden behind each other and snow-white when caught in the sun’s rays. With a smile, she tilted her head back, soaking in the warm sunlight, and let her fingers trail through the tall grass brushing against her legs, the harmony of crickets echoing around her.

It was all so peaceful.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so content.

Opening eyes she didn’t even remember closing, Jane stared into the blinding brightness of the sun until her sight blurred and she had to look away, averting her attention down and out into the meadow that had been turned honey-brown with the approaching winter. She blinked away the moisture in her eyes and, once the white spots that had been temporarily burned into her vision faded, spun in a slow circle, arms held out slightly like she’d done as a child.

Only after she’d completed the rotation and returned to her previous position did she see him.

Slowly, her arms lowered, dangled limply at her sides as she examined the figure that stood where no one had been before. There wasn’t much distance between them – no more than twenty yards at best – but she couldn’t seem to make out the details of his form. And the more she tried to focus, the more she couldn’t.

What appeared to be a black coat suddenly looked more like a suit. Or was it simply dark jeans and a sweater? Was that a collar lifted high on his neck or a scarf looped around it? Ebony hair curling around his ears or the tips of a hat?

Jane blinked and squinted with little luck. If anything, it only made him more indistinct. Shaking her
head, she decided to approach. However, each step she took had just as little effect as her squinting. Grass passed on either side of her so she knew she was moving forward, but he remained the same distance ahead despite never taking a step. Frowning, she stopped.

So did the grass.

So did the man.

Jane looked to the left, then to the right, then back to the motionless man. Still frowning, she rubbed down the hairs that had risen on her arms, swallowed the uneasy feeling that had settled itself in her stomach, and called out.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded tinny, like she was stuck inside of a can instead of standing in wide, open space. The only answer was the whisper of swaying grass, stirred by a wind she neither heard nor felt. She glanced away just long enough to confirm the grass really was moving before her attention returned to the figure. "Can you hear me?"

No movement.

No answer.

Nothing.

It was like the air had suddenly turned into water. Every breath felt heavy and forced, every movement sluggish, and another chill slithered up her spine at the eerie quiet that had taken over the field. Nervously biting at her lower lip, Jane looked over her shoulder.

The sea of grass stretched out behind her, ending finally in a line of pine trees that loomed in the distance. Aside from the still-waving grass she couldn't quite explain, there was nothing out of the ordinary. But she started and instinctively took a step back when she turned around to find the man now facing her.

She should have been able to see his expression. The clouds that had been painted across the sky weren't substantial enough to throw his features into shadow. However, when she focused on his face, it was as impossible to make out as his clothing had been. The only thing she could see were the arms that crooked out before disappearing behind his back and his wide stance.

It was an intimidating pose, but just as intimidating were the changes in the surroundings Jane was late to notice. Previously an unadulterated blue, the sky was now muddied, the color of algae on stagnant water, and the clouds had darkened to a dirty grey. But it wasn't just the sky. The trees, the grass, the air… everything appeared muted, dull.

"Who are you?" Jane took another step back. "What do you want?"

An unnatural wind swept through the clearing. This time, though, it was one she could feel, and she was surprised by the overbearing heat of it as it washed over her. Quebec wasn't the coldest place in the world, but it certainly never offered winds that hot. It swirled around her, whipping her hair into tangles and cutting off her breath with its heat, and as the man was partially obscured behind the locks, the uneasy feeling in her stomach grew into full-blown fear.

Something was wrong. Jane tried to breathe calmly even as her hands shook with a mixture of adrenaline and dread, but when a flicker caught her eye and she looked to the left to see the woods that surrounded the meadow ablaze, her control dissolved into mush.

Flames licked at the sky while smoke stained it a dark black, and whirling in a circle, she took in the
ring of fire that surrounded them, the haze that crept across the ground, the sounds of crackling as the trees were consumed by the inferno. It was improbable. It was impossible. It was…

A piercing snap echoed through the field, and Jane watched the trunk of a massive pine tree crumble, bringing down several others on its way to the forest floor. The fire had come from nowhere. It didn't make sense. So with panic quickening her heartbeat, she turned back to the thing that seemed to have started it all: the man.

He stood in the same position as before – outlined in red, highlighted by a deadly combination of smoke and flame and destruction – as unfazed by the situation as she was terrified by it.

Without warning, a cacophony of noises sounded all around her. A scream from the left revealed a stage that was alight while smaller objects struggled behind the blazing curtain of fire. A pop from the right revealed a cathedral complete with onion-style domes within the trees, gold leaf and vivid paint melting together into an oozing mess. A groan from behind revealed a figure shifting within the fog of smoke, something that towered even above the towering trees, something with eyes that glowed red. And she was just about to scream when she heard it.

Jane Foster

Her name was a whisper of a whisper, both louder and softer than everything else, coming from everywhere and nowhere all at the same time. It slunk through the air and burrowed into her bones, left a chill in their wake that made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

The sound of gunfire and yelling ripped through the air from some point to her right, but Jane could only gape at the man in horror. Not because of her name, though, but because of the thousand skulls beneath his feet… ten thousand skulls… hundreds of thousands of skulls… and when she looked down, her voice found itself again and she did scream because they extended beneath her own feet as well. The entire clearing had been transformed into a graveyard.

Jane Foster

She scrambled backwards, stumbling in the mess of bones and gaping mouths and empty eye sockets while her name reverberated in her head like a jangling melody. Low-slung clouds compiled of smoke hovered overhead, wind that smelled of salt and steel brushed her face, a dying sun cast the world a sickly shade of crimson… but Jane's nerve-endings had long since gone numb.

The fire was licking at her back, scorching the tips of her hair and clothes, and all she could do was wonder if it would hurt to be burned alive, if anyone would discover her charred remains in the mass grave, if she was the only one who heard the wolf howl.

Jane Foster

Her hands fisted in the hair at her temples. "What do you want from me?" The desperate yell was swallowed by the inhale of an otherworldly being behind her, by a low chuckle from the man in front of her.

A steady rhythm pounded out the cadence of her life. It was a drum, thumping an ancient pattern of whoops and calls around a bonfire. Then it was a heart, beating a racing tempo of panic and terror. Then it was a machine, adding an electronic mix of whirrs and beeps and…

Machines?

Jane paused.
Beeping?

The entire world was pulled into slow motion. Flickering flames curled around the trees in an intricately slow dance, more lover now than killer as they caressed their limbs while embers and ash rained down from the sky. In contrast, a tremor shook the ground and a growl split the air, making the skulls beneath her feet tremble with the shock, laugh at her impending demise.

But there was still beeping…

There was always beeping…

The man was still standing across the clearing, as motionless now as he'd been in the beginning even though flames had ignited the edges of his clothing. She blinked, and nothing changed. She blinked again, and he was suddenly right in front of her.

Always beeping…

Always searching…

Proximity did nothing to shed light as to the man's identity. He was as shrouded up close as he'd been from a distance. For all Jane knew, he was the physical manifestation of a shadow, blackness incarnate. Smoke filtered into her lungs instead of oxygen to leave her hacking, and she couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't stop.

Always searching…

Always searching for…

A hand darted out to grab her chin, and through the tears streaming down her face, she stared into the heart of darkness. Her fingers brushed fire-warmed leather and ice-cold armor. And when he leaned closer, she caught the faint scent of cedar and frost and apples and magic and…

*Do you believe in fate?*

---

Jane woke with a start, heart racing and skin clammy. The last traces of an exclamation lingered on her tongue, but she wasn't sure if the raw feeling in her throat was from her yelling or from the smoke that had leaked down into her lungs. It was impossible to tell the difference when fire still danced in her mind's eye.

The longer she breathed, though, the more it receded until she was able to focus on the familiar face in front of her. Belatedly, she became aware of the hand on her shoulder that, judging by its slight rocking motion, had shaken her awake and the faint beeping in the background.

"… capture the data, we need to go now."

She blinked and tried to catch up to what was being said. "What?"

"I said the machines are going off." Realizing she was both awake and aware, Erik released her shoulder and straightened beside her bed. "We need to leave now if you want any chance of recording the occurrence."
"Right." Mentally shaking her head free of the last few cobwebs from the haunting dream, she repeated again as she threw the covers back. "Right."

The cool air in their room hit her like a train, and her teeth chattered as she slipped on a pair of pants over her long underwear and a sweater and coat over her undershirt. Erik had already stoked the fire, but the warmth hadn't filled the room enough yet to make the multiple layers uncomfortable. Even if it would have, she'd suffer through it. The heavy clothing was absolutely necessary where they were going.

By the time Jane had finished buttoning her coat and slipping a knitted beanie over her head, Erik had disappeared through the bedroom door. It remained open a crack, just enough for her to see a slash of light from the kitchen downstairs, and she poked her head into the hallway to hear rustling and squeaky cabinet doors. He was probably gathering up some food for them to take along, their usual breakfast of granola bars and coffee.

Trying to keep quiet, she eased back inside the room. It was pointless, though, what with all the commotion. Lights blinked in varying patterns across a line of machines in the corner, alternating blue and green chasing each other across the electronic surface while the speakers hummed and beeped excitedly. She and Erik needed to leave soon. It was only a matter of time before…

"Jane, if you don't turn that damn thing off, I'll have no choice but to break your equipment."

Too late.

Pausing in the process of putting on her boots, Jane glanced to the cracked door. The call was muffled from travelling down the hall and through two wooden doors, but that did nothing to lessen the seriousness laced in the threat.

"The professor can flunk me for all I care. Some people like to sleep at night."

Sent to the Mont-Mégantic Observatory in Canada with a select group of other students on a university-funded winter break program aimed at the top tier of those striving for a degree in astrophysics, Jane wasn't the only one getting up at all hours of the night to document various interstellar activities. But she was the only one in the possession of equipment raucous enough to wake everyone else.

"I'm not joking, Jane!"

Bootlaces were quickly tied and tucked into her wool socks, gloves slid onto both hands, and then she was disconnecting the portable version of her machine and shoving it into her oversized coat pocket. Immediately, the larger portion, which would remain behind, fell silent. However, her pocket continued to emit a muffled beeping. Once they returned to the states, she'd have to remember to install a mute switch.

The door creaked when she widened it just enough to slip out and the machine continued to make its presence known, but neither of those stopped her from whispering a quiet apology to the door hiding her disgruntled classmate before making her way downstairs.

Jane carefully stepped off the last darkened step – more than once, she'd tripped on the dimly lit staircase – and crossed the narrow hallway towards the single slice of light, rounding the corner to a fluorescent-bright kitchen and a thermos full of coffee.

"Vivienne again?"

With a grateful smile to Erik, she wrapped her hands around the warm container. "Isn't it always?"
The liquid burned her throat on the way down but also helped to clear the last traces of sleep from her mind.

"The girl does enjoy her sleep." Erik turned around to collect the small backpacks loaded with thermal blankets, food, and coffee. Jane looked past him to the clock that read a quarter past four. Hopefully, lots of coffee. "I think she'd sleep past noon if given the chance."

"You make it sound like a bad thing, but I don't know… sleeping late doesn't sound so bad right now." As if to prove a point, her words dissolved into a yawn.

"Well, you can take a nap when we get back." Erik held out the smaller of the two backpacks. "Ready?"

Thinking of the warm bed upstairs, she issued a tiny sigh. "Why did I decide to study this, again?"

The question had become a tradition of theirs over the past couple years, always asked in the middle of the night when sleep was abandoned in favor of collecting data. Drive wasn't something Jane lacked, but it was still nice to receive a verbal reminder of her end-goal.

"Because you want to prove that Einstein-Rosen bridges are real and figure out exactly how they work."

Jane smiled at her favorite professor. "Oh yeah, that's right." Then, tucking the thermos into the mesh pocket on the side of the backpack and slipping her hands beneath the straps over her shoulders, she turned towards the door. "Let's go."

They turned off the lights in the kitchen, locked the door for the rest of the sleeping students, and made the short trek to the van. Any other time, they wouldn't bother with the vehicle – it was only three miles to the observatory – but the bitterly cold wind that had Jane covering her nose and mouth with her gloved hand was convincing enough. Not to mention walking three miles in the dark in the middle of a forest wouldn't be the wisest decision. Wolves weren't the only things prowling around in the twilight hours.

Erik maneuvered the van down the snow-lined lane, headlights briefly illuminating L'Auberge Aux Toits Rouges on the yellow welcome sign before they turned onto the main road. The forests on Route Chesham gave way to mostly open fields on Route du Parc, and no more than ten minutes must have passed before they were entering the empty parking lot.

The observatory wouldn't be open to the public for several more hours. Even then, options were limited as to how long someone could spend at the telescope. But that just added one more item to the ever-growing list of reasons she was thankful to have met Erik. His prominence in the field gave him unquestioned access to places she could only dream of.

Jane shifted her weight from foot to foot, trying to keep warm as she watched Erik unlock the door.

He'd helped her in more ways than she could ever hope to repay. As if saving her life wasn't enough, he'd taken her in after being discharged from the hospital, helped get her life back on track when no family came forth to claim her, spoken for her when she decided to attend Culver University. As far as she was concerned, he was family.

The lock slid open with a quiet click, and Jane waited on the threshold while Erik turned on a few lights. Their dim glow bathed the room in warm light, reflected off the telescope on the raised platform in the middle of the room, the various knobs and controls that decorated its surface, and the nearby screens that tracked what was being seen.
No matter how many times she saw the Ritchey-Chrétien telescope, it never failed to make her smile. But it wasn't just the size and capabilities of the one housed in the observatory. Every telescope gave her an almost childlike thrill. From the first time she'd found herself in Erik's study, more enthralled with the telescope than anything else he had to offer, she'd known her calling. It was what prompted her to follow in Erik's footsteps with a degree in astrophysics even before she'd shown an almost innate propensity for the subject.

"Which quadrant?"

Pulled from her thoughts, Jane blinked and refocused on Erik who was standing at the input dials, staring at her expectantly. After a bit of a struggle when a loose thread caught around a rough edge, the portable device was pulled from her pocket. She stared at the tiny screen and the blinking dot in the upper right-hand corner.

"NQ2. Same as all the rest." The hydraulics controlling the telescope hummed as they repositioned to the new location. "More specifically near Messier 81."

Erik inputted a more detailed set of right ascension and declination coordinates. "You've been centering most of your studies in that area."

"Well, if my equipment's correct..." And she had no doubt that it was. "There's been a lot of activity there. For a relatively stable galaxy, it's giving off massive readings."

Their heavier outer coats weren't necessary in the warmth of the observatory, so Jane slipped out of hers and folded it on a chair. Her backpack and the portable device followed soon after, the equipment beeping its goodbye and going dark as she powered it down. The only thing that went with her as she jogged up the stairs to the platform was the notebook containing details of all the occurrences she'd recorded during her time in Quebec.

"People have also documented higher than normal activity from NGC 3077 over the past few years." Erik stepped to the side as she neared the telescope. "A lot of activity won't justify you spending so much time there when it comes to your thesis."

"True, but the readings from NGC 3077 are completely different. The activity from that galaxy is because of a high rate of star formation, which is one hundred percent explainable. Messier 81, though..."

Jane leaned forward to peer through the lens into a veritable sea of stars. She twisted a few of the dials to zoom past the stars that made up Ursa Major and focused on the spiraling form of Messier 81. With another set of adjustments, the stars surrounding the supermassive black hole in the galaxy's center were thrown into clarity.

"The last burst of star formation it experienced was about one million years ago. Since then, it's been an established galaxy." She pressed the button that would record a series of images for later analysis and, pulling away, watched as the computer screen to her left displayed the pictures, tip of the pen between her teeth. "So what's causing all the recent activity?"

"It wouldn't be a stretch to say the anomalies are another set of star formations we're not able to see the proof of yet."

Attention still fixed on the pictures flashing across the screen, her lips twisted around the pen in an uncertain expression. "It's possible..."

"But you don't think so." Erik didn't even bother phrasing it as a question.
"Logic says yes, but my gut instinct says no." Curling one hand over the top of the computer, she leaned in as if doing so would help her find the missing link. "I just can't shake the feeling that there's some kind of connection between these anomalies and the Einstein-Rosen bridges."

When she'd first started to keep track of the activity, most of the readings had come from the area close to NGC 3079, a starburst spiral galaxy located fifty-two million light-years in deep space. However, over the weeks, the readings had gotten steadily closer to Earth.

NGC 3310 at fifty million light-years away, I Zwicky 18 at forty-five million, M101 at twenty-five million… something was constantly bringing the activity closer. Or it had been. A little over a week ago, the readings had suddenly and unexplainably paused at Messier 81, one of the more well-known spiral galaxies located almost twelve million light-years away. Since then, most of the activity had stemmed from that area.

"You're going to need more than a feeling if you want to be taken seriously."

"It isn't something I can explain, though." She briefly glanced from the apparently normal pictures of the galaxy to Erik and back again. "Not yet."

Without any other noise to drown them out, Erik's footsteps on the metal platform echoed through the room as he moved to stand beside her. "That won't be good enough for the scientific community."

Jane's eyes met his again, this time with pride sparkling in their depths. "I know." Then her stalwart gaze faltered, softened, fell. "But it's all I have right now."

The words fell between them, more than a little despondent, and her throat felt tight with frustration. She couldn't quite bring herself to let Erik see the disappointment written on her face, chose to hide it by burying her face against the eyepiece of the telescope instead. For a long while, there was only the quiet click of photographs being taken, but then his hand settled on her shoulder.

"You know that I back you on this line of research. I believe the Einstein-Rosen bridges exist just as much as you. But you have to find something more concrete for an idea like this to take hold. Science isn't built on belief, it's built on facts, and if you go into a professional review with this as support, you're going to be ripped to shreds." His fingers tightened momentarily. "That kind of feedback can kill a person's motivation. I don't want to see that happen to you, Jane."

The critique on her lack of concrete evidence was blunt.

It was also true.

Jane had read enough papers that dissected various scientists' findings and subsequently tore them apart – she'd even been the one to do the dissecting and tearing before – which meant the last thing she wanted was for her inconclusive findings to be on the receiving end of that sort of scrutiny. No one wanted to pick up the shattered pieces of their research, piece together what they could salvage, and start over.

"If the readings I've been receiving from Messier 81 were because of star formations, my equipment would still be picking up on signals from I Zwicky 18." A dwarf irregular galaxy, I Zwicky 18 was the youngest known galaxy in the visible universe and also one of the most productive, boasting a very high rate of star formation. "But it doesn't."

A slight flare to the right had her adjusting the eyepiece, zooming in until the top half of the galaxy cut a line through the center of the picture and she was staring at the vacant space beyond the
interstellar dust that accompanied the outer swirling arm.

"That means these readings..." Jane twisted the dial another half-turn and inspected the area through narrowed eyes. "Are coming from something else."

Faint traces of an Einstein-Rosen bridge, perhaps.

She didn't want to get her hopes up, but...

Suddenly, the view was overtaken by a swirling mix of green and red, and she pulled back to see that an aurora had erupted in the atmosphere directly in line of where she'd been looking. The telescope captured the image and, after she tapped the screen, printed out a copy she absentmindedly handed to Erik who hadn't yet noticed what was happening overhead.

"Another aurora." It was just one of many that always seemed to conveniently occur in the aftermath of an event. "Star formations, my ass. Coincidence can only explain so much."

Erik chuckled. "Now you're thinking like a scientist."

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One granola bar, two thermoses of coffee, and three hours later, the front door opened to reveal a matronly woman with snow-speckled hair and a thick scarf looped around her neck. Both Jane and Erik squinted and shielded their eyes when the bright sunlight fell over them.

"Morning, Laurie."

"Again?" The room seemed even darker when the door slammed closed behind the observatory's manager. "You two might as well bring blankets and cots and sleep in the attic for as often as I find you here. It would be more comfortable than those chairs."

"A tempting thought." As if to make a point, Erik's knees cracked when he stood. "We'll be out of your way in a minute. Just let us pack everything up."

"No rush, the observatory won't open for another thirty minutes." The remaining overhead lights were flicked on as Laurie made her way around the room, and she handed over their backpacks when she passed by. "Any luck this time, Jane?"

In the beginning, the woman had laughed at the subject matter of Jane and Erik's research and the idea of Einstein-Rosen bridges.

Now she was just as invested as they were.

"Unfortunately, no." Jane stuffed a couple binders filled with printouts into her backpack but kept a handful of unbound notes out to examine. "Just the same types of readings from Messier 81 that we've been recording for the past week."

"And an aurora."

The corners of her mouth lifted at the excitement in Laurie's voice as she repeated the woman's observation. "And an aurora." She shouldered the backpack and glanced through the single skylight. "Although that's just as much of a mystery as the source of the activity."
"Don't give up, dear." In the most grandmotherly type way imaginable, Laurie paused in her duties just long enough to place both hands on Jane's shoulders and offer an encouraging smile. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

However, the moment was gone as quickly as it had begun, swept away in a flurry of wool, paisley print, and greying hair as the woman retreated to the desk on the opposite side of the room. Jane was still staring after her when she felt Erik gently tug her towards the front door. They said their goodbyes – even though they would see each other the next time an event occurred; probably within a few days – and exited into bright sunshine, a clear sky, and a parking lot gradually filling with visitors.

"Laurie's right, you know." Holding the stack of loose-leaf papers close when a gust of wind blew through, she arched an eyebrow at Erik as they made their way to the van. "Eventually, you'll figure everything out."

Jane breathed a laugh. "That's a lot to figure out. There are more questions than answers when it comes to what we've been experiencing." Tilting her head back, she watched a flock of geese fly by. "Whatever is causing the readings, the fact that they're getting closer to Earth, if they're connected to the bridges in any way, why an aurora always follows after… I'd be happy with just one answer."

"In all my years of teaching, I've never met someone as gifted as you, Jane. Where some scientists take years to understand these theories, you made them your own in no time at all." Erik squinted up at the sky before nodding to a passing couple. "If I had to guess, I'd say you had some experience with this in the past."

"And yet, we'll never know because, like my past, everything remains out of reach."

It took a few steps for Erik to realize she'd stopped walking and turn around. "I take it nothing has come back over the years, then?"

Jane's past wasn't something they frequently talked about. The sting of not being able to remember coupled with the abandonment she'd felt when no one had come for her was enough for them to push aside the unknown, bury it in a hole in the back of their minds where it could be easier forgotten. That made this the first time in almost a year for them to breach the subject.

She inhaled deeply, exhale coming out in a melancholy sigh. "Not even close."

There were faint things every now and then – smells, sounds, tastes, and textures; dreams that seemed too vivid and too real to simply write off – but it was never enough to color the blank holes in her mind, flesh out the bones of her memory.

"We'd best be getting back to the chalet." Erik took a step closer. "Come on, I'll even make multekrem for you."

But not even a mention of her favorite traditional Norwegian dessert could overthrow the weight that had settled on her heart.

"You know, I think I'm going to stick around here." At the silent question on Erik's face, she clarified. "Just for a little while." She thumbed through her notes. "I want to go through this again and see if I can find anything else. When everyone else is around the chalet, it's hard to do that, but it's quiet up here."

For a moment, it looked like he was going to protest. His brow furrowed and his jaw tensed, but then the signs of concern smoothed away and he nodded. "Do you want me to come pick you up when
"No, I'll just walk back." By that time, the air would be significantly warmer. She waved away his insistent expression. "It'll be fine, Erik. Really."

"Alright, just do me one favor: call when you're leaving so I know when to expect you?"

Jane fought the urge to roll her eyes and offered a good-natured smile instead. For someone who never got the chance to experience what it was like to be a parent, Erik was notoriously protective. Although, it was possible that trait only applied to her considering everything they'd been through.

The van pulled out of the parking lot with a low rumble, and she lifted her hand one last time right before it disappeared behind a line of trees. Then, spotting a bench on the east side of the observatory, she relocated. It would be cooler outside, but at least it was more secluded than if she were to take up residence in one of the chairs inside.

Distractedly biting at one thumbnail, she flipped through the papers on her lap with the other hand. NGC 3079, NGC 3310, I Zwicky 18, M101, and now Messier 81… it didn't make sense. What did those galaxies have in common? What made them give off random bursts of energy different from anything she'd ever recorded? And why was the activity getting ever closer to Earth?

Abstract theories relating the events to Einstein-Rosen bridges weren't anything she could prove yet. The only thing she could definitively say was that the activity was located within the boundaries of Ursa Major.

Something was happening in that part of the universe.

The question was what?

"I believe I owe you an apology."

Jane blinked, looked up from the scribbled notes and over to a man sitting on the other end of the bench in surprise. The man didn't return her gaze, just leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees as the seconds stretched out. She hadn't even heard him sit down. Although, to be honest, she wasn't even sure how long it had been since Erik had left. It was easy to lose track of time.

"Surprising…" He stared resolutely at the hands loosely clasped between his legs. "You've never passed up the chance to comment on something like that."

"I'm sorry?"

"That would be my line." The side of his mouth quirked in a tiny, almost sardonic smile. "Although I won't turn yours down considering everything that was said."

Confused, Jane glanced around, even going so far as to check the observatory windows above her head. "I think there's been some mistake." The only option was a family nearby – three boys running circles around a middle-aged couple – but they were still too far away for the man to have been talking to them.

"Hardly." There was a ghost of a laugh hidden in the word.

"No, I mean…" She surveyed the area one more time just to make sure before turning back to the man. "I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

This time the laugh was more real, more substantial. "Perhaps it would help if I…" But when he
turned to meet her gaze, the borderline playfulness in his expression wavered and faded at the bewilderment in her own. His attention flicked back and forth between her eyes for a moment before his mouth snapped closed. "You don't know who I am."

Pale skin, dark hair, grey-green eyes, lean build, refined features… he was undeniably striking. And that was without taking into account the air about him. The natural sense of authority and control he exuded was something that couldn't be learned.

Jane studied the man, focus trailing from the slicked-back hair to the arching cheekbones, from the angular jaw to the long fingers. There were too many defining features, too many identifying details, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she would've remembered meeting him if they had. Unless, of course, that meeting had occurred in the lost years before her accident.

"I don't." She confirmed the question that wasn't a question with slight shake of her head and a regretful smile. "Should I?"

A group of children laughed as they ran by, their parents following shortly after, but no answer came from the man beside her. Time was drawn out in a silence punctuated only by those visiting the observatory, long enough for awkwardness to settle around them. When their impasse rounded the minute mark, Jane decided she'd inadvertently offended him and tried to explain.

"Please don't be insulted. I suffered a head injury a few years back and can't remember anything before that point, so it's entirely possible we have met and I just don't remember." He remained persistently quiet, confusion lowering his brows and dragging down the corners of his mouth. "Maybe if you tell me where you knew me from, it might jog something?"

It was a long shot. In the months after she'd been discharged from the hospital, she'd visited countless places trying to find anything that would trigger her memories only to be left disappointed. Still, it never hurt to try.

"I…" Whatever he'd been about to say was bit back, though, swallowed and replaced with something else. "What's your name?"

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry." Jane bumped the wayward sheets of paper back into a neat stack against her legs, set the pile on the bench between them, and held out her hand. "My name's Jane Foster. If I had any manners, I probably would've told you that earlier."


"Luke…?" She drug out the name in the universal prompt.

"Just Luke."

A quiet chuckle slipped out. "Fair enough." Angling her body more towards him, Jane draped one arm over the back of the bench and rested her chin in her hand. "So, Just Luke, can you shed any light on things I might have forgotten? Am I the person you thought I was?"

Anticipation fluttered in her stomach, set her heart on a quicker pace, made her breath stick uselessly somewhere between her nose and her lungs. After four years of dead ends, she was finally face to face with a possible connection to the past, to someone who could help untangle the shadows in her mind. She tried not to let expectation filter too heavily into her expression but knew she was most likely failing miserably. It was too hard to subdue the emotions that had already taken hold.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed his fingers make a small, almost imperceptible motion. It was nothing more than a twitch, really – a small lift of his index and middle finger before they settled
back into place – although she could've sworn his eyes narrowed in the moments after, almost as if he were evaluating her, judging her reaction.

But then his eyes lowered, first to the hand resting in her lap and then to the stack of notes between them. "No, you're not." His mouth twisted a bit as he reached out to finger the top page. "I was mistaken."

It had been a long time since Jane had allowed herself to feel so optimistic, which only made the sudden loss of it that much worse. Her mind went numb. The ground had disappeared from beneath her feet, and there was nothing to feel but the rush of wind in her ears from the free-fall.

"Oh." And because everything else she was experiencing was too complicated to formulate into words. "Oh."

Their eyes met briefly in the split-second before she turned, but she could sense his gaze on her even as she sat back against the bench and stared at everything and nothing. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"That's alright." Jane glanced at Luke just long enough to offer a reassuring, if not a little half-hearted, smile. "You'd think I would know better than to get my hopes up by now."

All being positive had ever done was set her up for disappointment. It was apparently a deeply ingrained trait, though, because she'd fall into it every single time without fail. Doing so made life painful … but still, she could think of worse things to be burdened with.

Black shifted against the background of snow, and she blinked to realize Luke was now standing. She quickly followed suit, absentmindedly noting how much taller he was than her when she had to crane her head.

"Leaving?" His focus drifted to her from some obscure point in the distance, and he gave a silent nod. "I probably should too." The sun was edging higher in the sky, which meant Erik was probably starting to worry about how long she'd been gone. It never failed, no matter how many times she assured him she'd be fine. "Well, it was nice to meet you, Just Luke."

His chin dipped again as he shook her hand for the second time. "Likewise, Jane Foster."

At the time, she would smile a farewell as her eyes roamed his features once more. Only later, in the dark and quiet of her bedroom with only her wandering thoughts for company, would familiarity tease at the edges of the empty spots in her mind. She would rub repeated paths across the places their hands had connected and bite down on her lip to the point of bleeding as she desperately tried to remember why a simple touch stirred the shadows in her past, why the grey-green of his eyes seemed so important.

"I don't know if you're from around here, but I'll actually be in the area until mid-January." Jane bent down to gather the stack of notes before the wind could scatter them. "Maybe I'll see you around?"

But when she straightened, there was nothing. Startled, she glanced around. However there was no sign of Luke anywhere. There had been no noise accompanying his retreat, no footsteps in the snow to mark his path. If not for the two imprints where he'd been standing, she would've thought he'd imagined him completely. It was like he literally vanished into thin air.

Jane shook her head, snorted a laugh at her own ridiculousness, and began to make her way down the road towards the chalet. He'd probably just stepped on the thin patches where the snow was already melting in the warm, midday sun and didn't show his footprints as well.
People didn't just disappear.

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – the Mont-Mégantic Observatory is an astronomical observatory owned and operated jointly by the University of Montreal, the University Laval, and McGill University. Founded in 1978, it houses the second largest telescope in Eastern Canada. Efforts to control light pollution have led to the establishment of the world’s first International Dark-Sky Association Dark Sky preserve around the observatory, which covers approximately 5,500 square kilometers.

L’Auberge Aux Toits Rouges, the chalet Jane and Erik were staying in, is an actual location near the observatory that offers several rooms for people visiting the area. Although I’ve never been there – or to Canada, for that matter – the pictures online look adorably quaint.

Also, the brief mention to Culver University is a direct reference to the university that Jane attended and eventually taught at in both the comic-verse and the movie-verse.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
2010: Willowsdale, United States

Chapter Notes

So, Jane has met up with Erik and spent some time with him... now let's introduce some other familiar faces. As opening chapters meant to set up Jane’s life post-memory loss and pre-Thor, some of these might feel a little slow. Hang in there, though. There are quite a few details that are thrown in here and there that will come into play down the line, and as we continue on, this second arc will only pick up steam.

Also, quite a few people have been wondering whether or not there will ever be a chapter from Loki’s perspective. I can say that there is one in the works, but it's still a couple chapters away.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen

“We lead strange lives, chasing our dreams from place to place.”

2010: Willowsdale, United States

"Do you have a preference on the length of an internship?"

"The longer the better. I'd train to be an Olympic gymnast if they gave me college credits as a reward. It's hard not to take advantage of legitimate ways to get out of class."

"How about a preference on location?"

"I'm good with any place so long as there's phone signal, internet access, and a bed. A liquor store isn't a requirement, but it wouldn't hurt either."

"And your area of study?"

"Political science with a specialization in international relations."

Jane paused without raising the pen from where it had been scrawling notes across the page, stared at the growing blot of ink, and finally lifted her gaze to the girl on the other side of the desk. The skirt suit coupled with a pair of dark-rimmed glasses gave off an appearance of professionalism and made for a good first impression. However, a closer look revealed a set of headphones dangling on each lapel and their accompanying cord disappearing inside the jacket.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was again?"
The girl grinned and crossed her legs. "Darcy Lewis."

"Right." Setting down the pen, Jane leaned back, rested her elbows on either arm of the chair, and intertwined her fingers. "Ms. Lewis, this internship is to study deep space anomalies and their potential association with Einstein-Rosen bridges. Don't you think that's a little… outside your area of expertise?"

"Possibly." Unperturbed, Darcy shrugged one shoulder. "What's an Einstein-Rosen bridge?"

Through sheer force of will, Jane managed not to issue a sarcastic laugh, make a face, or cover her eyes in embarrassment for the potential intern. Potential being the key word – and a rather generous one, at that – because if the girl didn't know one of the most crucial aspects of Jane's research, that essentially nullified her usefulness as an intern. Instead, she straightened in the chair, mouth lifting into the half-smile of a person trying to let someone down as easy as possible.

"Your resume is impressive, and I appreciate your interest…" She tapped the pages she'd been rifling through back into order and set them aside. "But I'm not sure you're the best qualified for this position."

"I've taken plenty of science courses." The chair creaked when Darcy stretched forward to point at the copy of her transcript. "I have eighteen credits even though I only needed six."

"Yes, but Intro to Biology, General Chemistry, and Basic Genetics won't be of much help if I ask you to analyze readings from atmospheric disturbances." She glanced at the list of courses again. "Neither will Intro to Nutrition."

Certain that she'd gotten the point across, Jane glanced at her watch. She'd only scheduled fifteen minutes for each interview, and the allotted time was nearing its end. If she wanted to get to the others before her four o'clock meeting, Ms. Lewis and her political science degree needed to vacate the only other chair Culver University had granted her small office. But judging by the musing look on the girl's face, she had no intention of leaving yet.

"We spent three weeks talking about atmospheric science in Physical Geology."

Only the innocent way in which Darcy offered the information kept Jane from sighing. "Most atmospheric science touched on in introductory courses relates to the chemistry or physics involved in weather forecasting and climate variability."

Having taken a similar course to fulfill an elective in her degree requirements, she knew that from experience. Fifteen minutes into the first day, she'd perused the syllabus and been disappointed to see the overwhelming focus on meteorology and climatology. To say the rest of the semester had been dull would be an understatement.

"A professor will occasionally spend time on aerology, but only a few tend to focus on aeronomy, which is the only specialization out of all those that could even distantly relate to what I'm researching."

Where aerology concentrated solely on Earth's lower atmosphere, aeronomy was much broader, studying any atmospheric phenomena that might occur between Earth's stratosphere and the far reaches of its magnetic field. Essentially, it looked at any planetary atmosphere that showed signs of physical and chemical processes as a result of solar radiation. It was still a far cry from her research – the only real thing they had in common was that both areas dealt with physics and space – but it was at least a step in the right general direction.
"You said you covered the subject for three weeks…" Picking up the pen, Jane paused just long enough for Darcy to nod a confirmation. "Did you go over dissociation or ionization at all? Or transient luminous events?" It was a long shot, but every little bit of experience benefited the girl's chances.

"Hmm… I think so."

"You think?"

"Well, we went through it pretty fast." Darcy fidgeted, distractedly picked at a fingernail. "And I was kind of going through a phase at the time where I liked to sleep in so…"

With a deadpan expression, Jane looked up from the notepad and finished the thought. "So you skipped class."

That was just her luck. The first applicant basically had zero experience in astrophysics and had been a habitual skipper. Committed to her decision, she pushed the chair back from the desk and stood up, a universal sign that the interview was over.

"Thank you for applying, Ms. Lewis, but I think your talents might be better suited elsewhere. I'll certainly keep you in mind, though." Darcy stood up as well and shook the hand Jane extended. "If you don't mind, would you send in the next applicant on your way out?"

"Sure thing. Thank you for your time."

Jane spared another look for the retreating political science major before sitting back down. But she hadn't done anything more than pick up the resume and transcript pages to throw away when Darcy snagged her attention again.

"Um, Dr. Foster?" The girl hovered in the doorway, one hand on the doorknob, the other on the frame. "There's no one else out here."

"I guess they forgot to tell you…" Darcy casually dug in her suit jacket pocket and pulled out an iPod. "Looks like I'm the only applicant." With a slight smile, she met Jane's eyes and inserted an earphone into one ear. "Is that enough to change your mind or would it help if I told you that one of the times I didn't skip class, we got the chance to evaluate atmospheric tide data retrieved from sounding rockets?"

"An intern? That's a good sign."

Flopping back onto the bed, Jane transferred the cell phone from one ear to the other and blew the hair from her face in a huff. "Or they're just tired of me asking and did this to get rid of me." She couldn't deny she'd made a nuisance of herself over the past six months.

"Not unlikely." Erik chuckled. "Don't feel bad, though. The department heads did the same thing to me when I first came back."
"But from what I've gathered, none of your research was ever as... out there as mine." The critiques from the professionals who had reviewed her papers and the mocking comments made on the few articles that had been published in various scientific magazines jangled in her head. "They treat me like a joke."

"That just means it'll be even better when you can finally prove them all wrong."

Jane watched the ceiling fan rotate overhead in a daze. "Until then, I'm the laughingstock of the scientific community."

"I can name at least four people who haven't laughed at you." On the other end of the line came the sound of a book slamming closed. "Five, if you count the new guy they hired to teach the quantum field theory courses."

"Jonathan hasn't read my research yet."

"Oh..." An awkward silence filled the space between them. "Well... um... four people then."

Erik sounded so uncomfortable Jane couldn't help but laugh at herself. "I swear, if I hadn't graduated with full honors at the top of my class, Culver would've kicked me out a long time ago." Or at the very least, written her off.

"They have more sense than that." The critical edge to her laugh eased into a genuine smile at his sincerity. "Remember that mess that came up a few years ago? The gamma radiation incident I told you about that ended up having ties back to the university? Whatever trouble you cause will never be anything close to that."

Jane didn't remember as much as Erik thought, only that some nuclear physics scientist had conducted a self-imposed experiment that had gone terribly wrong and resulted in some kind of... transformation.

"Wild theories or not, you're an expert in the field. Culver knows better than to shut you out completely."

"I guess." When the constant motion of the fan started to make her nauseous, she rolled onto her stomach, peeled off her socks, and wormed her way under the comforter. "Hey, did I tell you they gave me a grant too?"

His interest was so apparent Jane could easily visualize him in his study, leaning across the desk with eyes twinkling and a wide grin on his face. "No, but I want to hear all about it now."

"It came from a privately-funded facility out of California. Their original stipulations said I needed to center my research on the activity occurring in their area—"

"Those are nothing more than magnetic storms."

"That's what I told them." She'd spent all of one hour dissecting those readings before moving on to better alternatives. "We went back and forth on the subject for a while, but I finally convinced them to let me focus on the signals coming from New Mexico since those are more promising. I'll be all set to move out there as soon as the funds go through."

It was the only thing pending. Once the transaction was complete, she would be on the first plane out of Willowsdale with years of research, equipment, and Darcy in tow. Just the thought of being in the same location as what she'd been studying from a distance for the better part of a year now sent a jolt of eagerness through her heart.
"That's... fantastic, Jane." The quick patter of her heartbeat slowed at Erik's hesitation. "Really great."

"Then why do you sound so..." She trailed off, unsure of how best to describe it, and gestured indistinctly to the empty room.

"I'm happy for you. I just worry about you is all."

Still riding the high of her enthusiasm, Jane laughed off his concern. "It's New Mexico, Erik, not Siberia. What's there to worry about? The worst that could happen is I'll get sunburned being out in the desert. If it makes you feel better, I promise to wear sunscreen." Her comments were met with nothing but silence, though, and mollified, she tried to truly reassure him. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

Erik sighed, long and loud and more than a little exasperated. "It's not your physical safety that bothers me."

"Then what is it?"

"It's..." Whatever he'd been about to say was lost, masked behind another heavy exhale coupled with a thinly-veiled dismissal. "Nothing."

It didn't take almost ten years of knowing each other to see through his response clear as day. "Like I believe that. Seriously, Erik... what's going on?"

"You've always been an all-in type of person, Jane. It's what makes you a great scientist." Her determination had set her apart from her classmates from the beginning, and he'd told her as much on more than one occasion. "I just don't want you to get too far in that you can't find your way out."

Curling into the cocoon of warmth she'd created beneath the comforter, Jane fell silent as Erik changed the subject, smoothly transitioning into a discussion about the incoming students to the astrophysics graduate degree. But while he talked, she was only half-listening. And the part that wasn't taking in his comment about the students' performance was thinking about stars and galaxies and Einstein-Rosen bridges and abnormally high magnetic readings and...

She paused.

Then she mentally shook her head free of any thoughts whatsoever.

Erik was wrong. She might be single-minded, deeply motivated, and stubborn to a fault when it came to her research, but she could never lose herself completely in it. Drive wasn't a character flaw.

Stretching up onto her tiptoes, Jane grabbed the cardboard corners and wiggled the object forwards. Progress was miniscule, though, and she grunted with the effort of her struggles. When she tried again only to receive an inch of reward, she lowered herself and glared at the notebook-laden box, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

Packing up all the notebooks containing her observations of the incidents, subsequent thoughts, and off-the-wall theories had seemed like a great idea at the time. They had become tripping hazards, piled around the living room floor as they were.
Hiding the box away on the top shelf in the closet had seemed like an even better idea. Her apartment wasn't uncomfortably small, but it wasn't exactly large either. Any bit of extra space she could get was appreciated.

What she hadn't anticipated was ever needing to get the box down.

Her past years of research had reached their current position courtesy of Donald Blake and his impressive torso. Said duo was also responsible for dragging them down if she ever needed to locate something. That meant he would normally be in her place, easily pulling down the box so it could be packed onto the moving van parked outside.

But Donald wouldn't be around to retrieve the box or help her pack. He wouldn't be showing up to tell her goodbye, making sure she hadn't missed anything, or wishing her luck on her new venture because she'd broken things off with him only a few days before.

"Seriously?" Remnants of a frown still on her face, Jane turned just enough to see Darcy in the doorway of the closet. "I cleaned out my room and the kitchen, and you're still working on the same box."

"It's heavy."

"It's been two hours, Jane."

She turned back to the box and discreetly checked her watch, surprised at how quickly the afternoon had passed. "And I might have gotten distracted."

"Yeah, I figured that." The sound of shuffling papers came from the far corner of the bedroom, but before Jane could object, Darcy smoothly cut her off. "Don't worry, I'm keeping everything in whatever crazy order you had them."

She hadn't meant to pull everything out when she was supposed to be loading up the van, but the glimpse of an old, scribbled theory from her early days at Culver was hard to ignore. It never hurt to revisit old ideas every once in a while to see if advances in other areas might apply. Unfortunately, the concept had turned out to be just as improbable now as it had been when she'd first written it down.

"I suppose you could just let it fall and then repack it."

"Sure, if you feel like paying to repair the floor and reimbursing me for my lost deposit. This thing would bust a hole right into Ms. Jenkins' bedroom." It was probably an exaggeration, but with roughly thirty notebooks in the box, she didn't feel like taking the chance. "I'm going to get a stepladder."

Leaving Darcy kneeling in the room, Jane wound her way through the maze of boxes in her room, through the rest of her apartment of the past three years, and down to the maintenance closet at the end of the hall.

When she opened the door, the smell was the first thing she noticed.

But when she flicked on the light, she instinctively stepped back.

With the acrid smell of scorched wiring in her nose, Jane took in the blackened interior of the closet in shock. The walls, the shelves, the supplies... everything had liquefied into a nearly unrecognizable state by the heat of what had to be an electrical fire. Only the topmost corners of the room were spared, and even those sported brown-tinted, curling strips of wallpaper.
In the moments directly after the discovery, her thoughts were too sidetracked with running back to Darcy and calling the landlord to notice much else. It was only later when she was explaining what had happened to the police that she saw the especially dark spot on the upper edge of the doorframe. A handprint.

And if she turned her head just right, it almost looked like… claws?

"I think you need to take a break."

"That would be a little counterproductive, don't you think?" Jane's brow furrowed in a frown, mouth turning down at the corners. After explaining the hitches that still remained in identifying the data, that was the last suggestion she'd expected or wanted to hear. "How am I supposed to figure all this out if I'm taking a break?"

"You're in too deep, Jane."

Just as she was about to bring up the time he'd gone two days without sleeping because he was so close to a breakthrough, she blinked and focused on a couple students across the courtyard who were staring at her strangely. Taken aback, she paused for a moment before realizing the frown meant for Erik had been unintentionally cast on them. Immediately, her face smoothed. She waved an apology and quickly pivoted on the spot, hiding her embarrassment by turning into the crook of the building.

"I'm not in too deep."

The cell phone static did nothing to disguise his sigh. "You've been working on this line of research for as long as we've known each other."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"In those first few months after we met, anyone else would've been preoccupied with... other things." Jane snorted at Erik's poor attempt of skirting around the issue of her past. "Instead, you were picking up the wild trails from some of my old research and running with them."

The toe of her shoe scuffed the brick wall in front of her. "So that's a bad thing." This time there was no question, only the harsh undertone of offense.

"I didn't say that."

"Well, you're not not saying it either."

"I know you, Jane. We may not be able to talk as often as we used to, but I know you're thinking about this stuff night and day. Constantly running tests, analyzing data, comparing theories..." The accuracy of Erik's statement was a testament to how well he understood her, and they both knew he was right, even if she refused to admit it. "I just feel like you're in too deep to see anything more than the details."

She aimed a particularly hard kick at the wall. "It's the details that prove the science."

"Yes, but sometimes it helps to take a step back so you can see the big picture."
But stepping back from her research meant not investigating the incidents, and not investigating the incidents meant not finding the connection with the Einstein-Rosen bridges, and not finding the connection with the Einstein-Rosen bridges meant she was back at square one with only the emptiness of her mind for company.

Fingertips white from the pressure with which she gripped the phone, her tone turned insistent, tried to make him understand. "Erik, the details—"

"Are consuming your life." The rest of her appeal dissolved into air, was expelled in the rush of an exhale at the blunt declaration. "When was the last time you got a decent night's rest? Or went out and did something fun?"

"I enjoy what I do. Work is fun."

"Work is work, Jane, and while you're burying yourself in it, life is passing you by. If you don't pause and look around every once in a while, you're going to wake up one day and wonder where the years went." Erik's voice softened. "There's nothing wrong with taking some time for yourself."

The steady bumping of Jane's shoe against the wall stopped, and she leaned forward to press her forehead to the rough brick, traced the ragged lines of grout with her free hand, watched the tiny flecks of mortar vanish into the brown, summer-brittle grass.

She was guilty, there was no denying it. Guilty of doing exactly what Erik said. But it was such an easy thing to do, fall into her research until it was all she could see. Admitting that there was more than one reason she was doing so was infinitely more difficult.

In the beginning, she'd wandered the line where colorful memories glided into yawning darkness in a desperate search for answers. Now, though, that line was one she no longer actively explored. Over the years, it had become intimidating – scary, even – and the longer she went without knowing her past, the more she wondered if she even wanted to know.

Maybe there was a reason the memories had been lost.

Maybe there was a reason they hadn't returned.

"The world keeps on spinning whether you're staring at the stars or not." Starting, Jane struggled to remember what they'd been talking about as she came back to the conversation. "It's not going to come to an end. God knows I've turned down research opportunities plenty of times."

A rebuttal was poised and ready to be delivered, but she swallowed it in favor of chasing the new topic that had opened up.

"Speaking of research opportunities, I've been meaning to ask you…” She lifted her head from the wall and spun until her back was pressed into the corner, waited until a group of students had passed before continuing, voice low. "Whatever happened with that group that approached you a few weeks back?"

"What group?"

"You know… the dark cars, dark suits, dark sunglasses one." There was nothing but silence from the other end of the line. "You said they looked like spies." More silence. "And that they kept trying to convince you to go with them by talking about something with massive amounts of power."

"Oh, you mean the people from that government agency or whatever it was?" Smiling to herself, Jane hummed an affirmative. "Pushy bunch… they didn't want to take no for an answer."
They'd been on the phone at the time. In the seconds before Erik had hung up, she'd managed to overhear snippets of the exchange, but those few seconds hadn't been long enough for her to catch any particulars. Unfortunately, Erik hadn't been very forthcoming once he'd called her back. What little bit of information she'd managed to wrestle from him had been hard-won.

However, if the group was as insistent as he'd described, she figured they would've returned. The more enticing the information, the harder it would be for even Erik to resist. He was a scientist, after all, same as her, and the chance to be in on something not open to the public was virtually impossible to ignore. It was the teasing dog bone, the dangling carrot, and Jane was ninety-nine percent sure the men would've returned with an offer Erik couldn't refuse in the weeks since.

"I haven't heard anything else from them."

Or she was wrong and they found someone else.

"Really?" She couldn't hide the surprise in her tone, didn't even try. "I wouldn't have guessed that."

"Me either, but I'm not complaining." A muffled screech sounded in the background, followed by a high-pitched whistle, and Erik's voice cut in and out with the growing noise around him. "Hey, Jane, I hate to cut this short, but I really need to get on the train if I want to make it back to Zagreb by sundown."

Currently on sabbatical, Erik had chosen to spend the time in Croatia where he'd partnered with the physics department at the University of Zagreb to further some of his personal research. Jane had been beyond excited for him when she'd first heard the news, but six months of being unable to see her closest friend and mentor was something she wasn't used to. She missed him. Terribly.

"I'll talk to you again soon." Another whistle pierced the air. "Think about what I said, alright?"

Dry wind blasted Jane's face but did nothing to ease the overbearing heat. If anything, the sweltering edge to it only made her face flush all the more. Her hair was pulled high in a ponytail, but the wisps at the nape of her neck were still damp, dripping sweat down beneath the collar of her shirt to trickle between her shoulder blades.

With a grimace, she grabbed the hem of her shirt with one hand and fanned.

Nearly two months had passed since the two girls had moved to Puente Antiguo, but neither of them were used to the heat yet. On a good day, the weather outside hovered in the miserable mid-nineties range. The temperature in the small lab where they spent most of their time wasn't usually far off. That meant complaints about the workspace not being kept cool enough for normal human occupation were a regular event, as was the steady drone of at least five oscillating fans.

Jane wasn't trying to be a control freak about the situation – borderline wrestling matches in front of the thermostat usually dissolved into name-calling on Darcy's part, her favored one being temperature Nazi – but trying to survive on the limited funds from the grant they'd received made penny-pinching a necessity. It would be easy to blame all the strife on her intern, but Jane had shoved her head into the ice-steam that crept out of the open freezer door in the middle of the night on more than one occasion. Not that she'd ever admit that to Darcy, of course.

Letting go of her shirt, she relaxed into the lawn chair, steadfastly ignored the way her skin stuck to
its plastic strips, and alternatively studied the magnetometer resting on her outstretched leg and the device that measured abnormal particle readings in the atmosphere in her hand. Both were quiet, their screens dark, dials motionless.

Jane glanced away from the equipment just long enough to check her watch. Four in the morning – or rather, two minutes until – which only meant one thing.

"Any second now…"

A cursory scan of the twilight sky revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Ursa Major twinkled in front of her, the slivered crescent moon hung close to the horizon to her right. Everything was as it should be. Not even one wisps of a cloud marred the view. For the moment, at least.

During the first few years, the equipment would register anomalies at seemingly random intervals, no discernable rhyme or reason to their pattern. One day it would happen at nine in the evening; the next, at two in the morning. Sometimes – albeit, very rarely – she would even pick up readings in the middle of the day when she couldn't see anything other than clear, blue sky.

For the past fourteen days in a row, though, the events had occurred at the exact same time down to the second. So either the occurrences were falling into regularity by chance – not unlikely but highly improbable – or they were converging because of some larger reason – more likely but still frustratingly unexplainable.

Jane checked the time again. As the secondhand neared its peak, she sat a little straighter in the chair, eyes trained on the sky, breath held in anticipation.

Three…

Two…

One…

And precisely on cue, the magnetometer beeped to life, the dials began to whir, and the sky brightened with the soft green of an aurora.

"This is Erik."

"Are you busy?"

Erik's weary laugh sounded like he hadn't slept for days. "I've been comparing different cultures' star charts dating back to the nineteenth century for the past four hours now. Please, distract me for a little while."

The lights from the aurora drifted through the twilight sky, outlining the clouds in a shimmering green, and even though no one was around to see, Jane pulled a face and tilted her head from side to side. "A distraction is one way to put it, I guess."

"What's going on?" A mixture of concern and excitement began to filter through his voice. "Has something happened?"

"Well… not exactly." It was more what she thought was going to happen. The occurrences were too
regular and too close for her to write off as harmless anymore. Something was brewing in the cosmos, she just knew it.

"Jane…"

"Look, I think you need to come out here." The dial attached to the equipment that measured particle readings was spinning out of control while the magnetometer beeped wildly. "Now."

His response was muffled, most likely from a hand being drug down his face. "Jane, we've talked about this before. You need to—"

"Erik, please." The last thing she wanted to hear was another lecture about how she needed to take time off, not when there were more important things happening.

"I've only been granted access to some of these files for a short period of time. If I got up and left in the middle of this, all the time I've spent here would be wasted. Can you give me a week, at least?"

Waiting would be risky. For all she knew, the pattern would be broken by then or the occurrences would stop completely. "Have I ever asked you for something like this before?"

"No."

"Okay, then." The aurora swirled around in a whimsical dance, flared brightly for a few seconds, then blinked out of existence. In its wake, the sky seemed darker than normal even as the stars that comprised Ursa Major shone brightly. "Trust me when I say you want to see this."

For a moment, there was nothing but the electric hum of static buzzing in her ear. Jane pulled the phone away to check the signal, brought it back to more relative silence, waited as patiently as she could. And then…

"I'll be there in two days."

Previously a calm blanket overhead, the clouds were now churning into a whirlpool-like creation, a maelstrom in the sky. Small lights dotted the turbulence, but they weren’t the gleam of stars. No, these were something else. Luminescent, the lights were sucked into the circular spin of the clouds, ever-rotating the center and changing hues as they went.

Radiant yellow to vibrant red to rich green to deep violet… they were a color wheel display, a virtual rainbow of light. And if the combination of excitement and anticipation that was currently sending jitters through her nerves wasn't also referring any thoughts not directly related to atmospheric anomaly and potential Einstein-Rosen Bridge and collect every scrap of data possible and I told you so into some obscure section of her mind for the time being, Jane would've said it was almost beautiful.

What came out, though, wasn’t a comment brimming with technical details or an expression of admiration. Instead, it was the very unscientific question on the tip of her tongue.

"What is that?"

In the time it took for Erik and Jane to squeeze through the sunroof, the display had grown even
larger. The wind had also picked up, dust beginning to stir around the entire area until they had to squint and shield their eyes from the grit.

Erik's elbow bumped her temple as he leaned towards her, attention still fixed on the sky. "I thought you said it was a subtle aurora."

Even with his head canted in her direction, his voice was nearly lost in the wind, but all she could manage was a speechless shake of her head. They had been only subtle auroras. However, there was nothing subtle about what was happening at all. This was... she had to forcefully repress the urge to gape, wide-mouthed and wide-eyed, at the sight.

Suddenly, the vortex of the clouds began to form into what appeared to be a funnel, and the only response she could formulate was an order for Darcy as she slid into the passenger seat.

"Go!" The van roared to life, was thrown into gear, and lurched forward in quick succession. Momentum from the hairpin turn threw Jane against the door, but she didn't object to the impact, just leaned out the window, infrared camera in hand, and laughed at the image showing up on the screen. "Get closer."

Darcy shot her a look, barking a sarcastic laugh. "Right... good one." Then, not receiving the reaction she'd obviously hoped for, the girl did a double take, disbelief etched across her features. "You're serious?"

"Just go!"

Turning back to the — could it even be called an aurora anymore? — occurrence, Jane peered through the eyepiece to see the funnel had lengthened and was now extending towards the ground in a cyclone-like structure.

When Darcy swerved around a rock, Jane shifted to keep the sight in the viewfinder. In the process, the magnetometer slid off her lap and settled between her feet on the floorboard. The steady beeping that the trio had become accustomed to over time had escalated into a shrill whine in a direct correlation with the increasing magnetic readings from the storm.

Without a doubt, other scientists' equipment would be registering the same abnormalities. Most of them would write it off as a particularly strong magnetic storm, but that would only benefit Jane because she would be the only one to offer a live recording of the incident with infrared readings that...

The cyclone connected with the ground in an explosion of dust. A shudder worked its way through the earth after the impact, and when it reached the approaching van, Jane's concentration slipped for a moment as she gaped at the sight, at the whirlwind of dust and light and energy and a thousand other things she could only hope to explain one day. The scientist in her couldn't be distracted for long, though.

Within seconds, the camera was back up. They were nearing the edge of the cyclone now, and the window frame dug into her back as she all but sprawled out the window, camera aimed up at the scene. When the van jerked hard in the opposite direction of where they needed to go, Jane pulled herself back inside the cab.

"What are you doing?"

Desperation and exhilaration and a deeply ingrained need to understand made the words come out a little harsher than intended, but she couldn't possibly get accurate data if they were travelling away
from the activity.

Darcy yelled back, just as on edge. "I am not dying for six college credits."

Really, the girl was just being dramatic. It was impossible to definitively prove at the moment, but Jane would've bet her doctorate degree that whatever they were witnessing wouldn't jeopardize their wellbeing.

Another tremor shuddered through the ground, and she peeked out the window, dust pelting her face like tiny projectiles.

On second thought, maybe she'd only gamble her master's.

Another tremor rattled the van and had Erik tumbling across the backseat and into the built-in shelves with a Swedish curse.

Her bachelor's.

Another tremor shook the earth, this time causing the girls to shriek as well as the van tilted precariously onto two wheels before slamming back down to all four.

Jane backtracked. Really, she'd never been the betting type anyway. But no matter how dangerous the situation, she refused to withdraw now, not when she was on the brink of a discovery, not when she was so close.

Abandoning the camera for the moment, she leaned across and grabbed hold of the steering wheel and jerked it hard to the right. The van swerved, fishtailing in the desert sand. Once Darcy recovered from her surprise, she shot Jane an irate look and jerked the wheel in the opposite direction. They continued to struggle for control of the vehicle, all while a plethora of curses filtered from behind them as Erik was thrown back and forth with the sharp movements.

After a particularly hard twist that pulled the wheel free of Darcy's grip, the van turned back towards the tornado. Excitement was a thick lump in her throat, the quickened pace of her heart… and there was just enough time to glance up at the massive structure before they disappeared into its swirling mix of dust and lights.

The view was all sand, each grain highlighted by the van's headlights and impossible to see through. Jane squinted with little luck. There was no way to tell if they were approaching the center as she'd intended or cutting across to emerge on the other side.

She was just starting to reconsider the wisdom of choosing to drive into the mess when a mound of rocks appeared before them.

Time seemed to slow and speed up at the same time. Erik shouted out a warning, his hand appearing between the front seats to point at the coming obstruction, Darcy grabbed the wheel, whipping it hard to the left and away from the rocks, and Jane… she did nothing more than yell as the van spun out of control and struck a figure that appeared from nowhere.

She probably looked ridiculous, strands of hair caught in a mouth wide in shock and gaping at Darcy, but she was too busy thinking about what she'd have to tell the police to care. If the scientific community already shunned her, how much worse would it be if she was charged with a crime?

The sound of the back door sliding open ended the moment, and the two girls followed Erik's lead, jumping out of van and sprinting towards the figure lying prone in the sand, flashlight beams waving wildly through the darkness.
"I think that was legally your fault."

Jane shot a glare at Darcy over her shoulder but decided against commenting, pointing back at the vehicle instead. "Get the first aid kit." She just hoped they wouldn't need it.

Between jumping over a few holes, stumbling through a section of loose sand, and being gut-wrenchingly nervous over the entire situation, a few minutes passed before Jane realized the atmospheric occurrence was gone. She glanced up at the sky. The clouds had dissipated, leaving a clear expanse in their wake. The rainbow-hued lights were also gone, and the dust that had been stirred up by… whatever it was they'd witnessed was falling back to the ground, settling around them like snow.

Having passed Erik, Jane was the first to reach the person they'd hit. She fell to her knees and leaned over him as she checked for any obvious injuries.

"Do me a favor: don't be dead." Other than a few scrapes and bruises, he appeared to be fine, but he still hadn't moved by the time Erik caught up. Desperation gnawing at her stomach, she added a quiet plea. "Please."

Dirty-blonde hair fell across his face in streaks, caught in the drops of blood already congealing around a scrape at his temple and the scruff that lined his jaw. Jane reached out to brush them away but paused at the last minute. With only inches separating them, she remained there, frozen, fascinated, absorbed in the sensation that accompanied their proximity.

The tingling started in her fingertips, slipped under her nails to twine with the blood in her veins. It looped around the tendons sticking out on the back of her hand, crept around the bones in her wrist, and rounded her elbow, increasing in intensity the entire time, but before it could reach her shoulder, she withdrew her hand with a sharp inhale and held it to her chest.

Her nerve endings were alight and the hair on the back of her neck was on end, but it was the past she was lost in. The shadows of the unknown wavered, teased, swirled in on each other – she held out her hand, focus alternating between it and the unconscious man – and it was all because of a feeling.

A sensation that was almost familiar…

A sensation that felt almost like…

Suddenly, the man's eyes opened to reveal an astonishingly clear shade of blue.

"Whoa…" Darcy's approaching footsteps slowed then stopped. "Does he need CPR? Because I totally know CPR."

Arm still tingling, Jane exhaled slowly when the man met her gaze. The van's headlights darkened the hollow spaces beneath his eyes and threw the right side of his face into shadow, but the darkness did nothing to dim the strength of his focus that seemed to bore into her.

"Jane?" Sand crunched beneath Erik's feet as he stepped closer. "Jane?"

One corner of the man's mouth twitched briefly before he groaned, laid his head back on the ground, and brought one hand to cover his face. With their gaze broken, Jane looked first to Erik and then to the empty desert that surrounded them, at a complete loss.

"Where did he come from?"
Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter - Willowsdale, Virginia is a fictional town used in Marvel
Comics and is the location of Culver University where Jane Foster, Erik Selvig, and
Bruce Banner spent quite a bit of their time. Also, since the first Thor movie occurs in
2011, consider this chapter to have spanned from winter 2010 into spring 2011.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of
inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you
want to.
Chapter Notes

After a prologue, eighteen other chapters, and nearly one thousand years, we’ve reached the first Thor movie. Just so everyone’s aware, I have no intentions of rehashing the entire film. There’s no point in going through every piece of it again. Instead, we’ll highlight a few significant parts that will be expanded and tweaked just a bit before we get into more interesting things.

Also, I know everyone is missing Loki. To be honest, I am too. All I can ask is that you be patient and hang in there for these next couple chapters. Loki will make his reappearance soon with a chapter all his own!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen

“And men said that the blood of the stars flowed in her veins.”

2011: Puente Antiguo, United States

Jane Foster was not unaccustomed to having bad days.

Waking up in a foreign hospital with a head injury, inexplicable frostbite on her hand, and only a vaguely familiar name jangling around in the emptiness of her mind had been bad. So had the day she’d been released from the hospital only to stand in the parking lot, alone and forlorn, until Erik had graciously offered his home to her.

There had also been the approximately eight weeks she’d spent trying to rediscover her lost identity. Never had she wasted so much time standing in lines and arguing with people than she had during those two months. After it was over and done with and she’d calmed down, it was easier to understand where they’d been coming from. It was strange for there to have been no record of a Jane Foster ever having existed.

But the past two days… they were, by far, the worst ones Jane had ever had.

And everything was made all the worse by the fact that they’d started out with such promise.

Darcy had been in a relatively amiable mood despite the ungodly hour they’d had to wake up – Jane couldn’t exactly be classified as a morning person, but Darcy loved sleep more than she loved alcohol – Erik had finally arrived in New Mexico to offer his assistance with the atmospheric disturbances – his presence was welcome, stellar events aside, because they were rarely able to see each other anymore – and she’d recorded evidence – irrefutable, undeniable, hardcore evidence – of
the anomalies she'd been tracking for the past six and a half years.

All in all, a fantastic start.

Then she'd driven into a potentially deranged man who called himself Thor, hit him again when picking him up from the hospital, been forced to deal with absurd levels of haughtiness until she was finally able to break through his arrogance, and had her equipment confiscated by some secret government agency.

For one bright, shining moment, she'd had everything. All she could ever ask for to prove her theories correct.

Now she had nothing.

Emotions falling into the hollow space between anger, frustration, and depression, Jane sat on the floor of her trailer and ran a finger along the edge of a cardboard box full of blank notebooks. They'd been there for weeks, ready and waiting to be filled with data from the occurrences, hastily scribbled notes, and rough sketches. Instead, they would remain as empty as the desks in the lab where all her equipment had sat until only a few hours ago. The only things that remained were the magnetometer and the device that measured particle data, both normal items in the field and easily replaceable.

Her brows dipped into a frown as she pushed the box under the bed with a harsh sigh. After a few days, when the irritation had passed and resignation had set in, she would pick up the scattered pieces and begin again. Of that, she already knew. It would take more than losing her research to stop her, and if that agent believed otherwise, he had another thing coming. But that still didn't make it okay for years upon years of her work to just be taken. Doing so wasn't right. It wasn't…

Jane's head snapped to the side at the knock that came from behind her. Pulled from her thoughts, she cast a cautious glance to the clock on the microwave to see it closing in on midnight, far too late for any normal person to visit. Not that she had many visitors to begin with, but that was beside the point.

Hesitant, she cracked the door just enough to peek out. The first thing she saw was blonde hair, a wide smile, and blue eyes. When her attention shifted to the barely conscious figure thrown over his shoulder, though, she gasped and opened the door fully.

"Oh my god, is he ok?"

"He's fine, not injured at all." She stepped back to let the pair in, wincing when Erik's head thumped against the doorframe even as Thor laughed. "I'm sorry, my friend."

Judging by the ridiculous grin and glazed look, Erik had long since passed the point of mild inebriation. It wasn't a stretch to assume he probably hadn't even felt the impact. Even still, she leaned forward enough to check his eyes.

"What happened?"

"We drank, we fought…" Thor patted the back of Erik's leg. "He made his ancestors proud."

It would be interesting to see if the borderline unconscious scientist would agree with that assessment in the morning.

The already cramped interior of her travel trailer was made even more so by the sheer bulk of Thor, which also made squeezing by him an interesting feat. He turned as much as possible, but it wasn't enough to prevent her from brushing against his arm in passing, their eyes meeting momentarily at
the contact. When he offered a charming grin, Jane ducked her head, hiding her flush behind the curtain of hair that fell between them as she gathered a pile of clothes off the bed.

Contrary to popular belief – mostly Darcy's – she wasn't a prude. Until Donald's career had become the number one priority in his life, their relationship had been completely normal. However, in the months since their relationship had ended, there had been a significant lack of men in her life.

It wasn't something she thought about often. The ever-increasing events had done a spectacular job of keeping her otherwise distracted. But she was only human, so there were still times a gnawing ache would take up residence in her bones, the empty kind that could only be filled by another person. Being around attractive men was enough to stir those base types of feelings. Having a man like Thor smiling at her as they failed to maneuver the narrow space without touching… well, it was enough to make any woman with a pulse blush.

Squeezing past him once more, Jane tossed the clothes onto the couch and called over her shoulder. "Put him on the bed."

There were a couple heavy footsteps, a quiet grunt, and then the squeak of worn-out springs as Erik flopped onto the bed. All the while, she arranged the messy heap of clothes into something only marginally less messy, eager to give her hands something to do and buy time for the heat to recede from her cheeks.

"Oh, I still don't think you're the God of Thunder…" A quick peek revealed Erik to be patting Thor's cheek, and a smile pulled at her mouth of its own accord at the sight. It had been a long time since she'd seen her mentor drunk. "But you ought to be!"

Straightening, she pressed her back to the cabinet, ignored the sting of the hinges digging into her spine, and stared at everything except for the two men until Thor's immediate presence in front of her forced her to focus on him. He took a step towards the still open door as if to leave, then hesitated and turned.

A chill shivered up her spine and sent goosebumps trailing down her arms as the cool air from outside slipped around his form. Unlike her, though, Thor didn't seem to notice the cold. He stood there in only the grey undershirt and the thin, flannel jacket she'd loaned him, surveying the other half of her trailer with a curious expression, and while he did, she studied his profile.

In a way, he reminded her of Donald. The muscular frame, square jaw, and blonde hair were all details so very reminiscent of the doctor. But there was something different about the man before her, something she couldn't quite describe. It was more than the playful way he smiled or the gleam in his eyes, though.

It was the antiquated manner of speaking.

It was the gut feeling that there was more to him than met the eye.

It was the unexplainably familiar tingle in her skin that had been lingering since the moment they'd first met in the center of a symbol-filled impression.

"Are these your chambers?"

"Um…" Her mind was slow to come back to the present, only gradually becoming aware of Thor's patient expression as he waited for her answer. "It's more of a temporary living situation." If temporary meant every night for the past two months.

There was enough money in the grant for her to have rented space for the lab and a place to stay.
However, the less she spent on trivial things, the more there would be left for her research. So when a coworker offered their travel trailer for her to use, she'd put aside her own comforts and jumped on the opportunity.

Jane's attention drifted around the trailer.

Not everyone was in a financially stable position – Erik had acquired a motel down the street – or had parents willing to wire money with only a single phone call – Darcy was renting a small apartment beside the lab – but that was fine. It wasn't the best or most comfortable place to live, but it was free. That was all that mattered.

Suddenly, Jane spotted the soggy remnants of cereal that had been her supper. "I'm sorry, I don't usually have guests."

She quickly snatched up the bowl and the cereal box and, taking in the sink already filled with dirty dishes, settled on one of the overhead cabinets. Both items disappeared into the closest one, shoved between an unused skillet and a cookie sheet. Then, spinning back around, she tucked her hair behind her ear and laughed nervously.

"Actually, I never have guests." Thor smiled, apparently unperturbed by the fact that she'd just put a dirty bowl in a cabinet. When his mouth slipped open, she cut him off before he had the chance to potentially comment on the dishes in the sink or the puddle of milk on the fold-out table or the thin layer of New Mexico dust that covered nearly every surface of the trailer. "Can we go outside?"

It was midnight and cold. All around, an odd request. Nevertheless, after a brief recovery, Thor smiled again and nodded. "Yes." And after taking the time to lay out a couple painkillers and a glass of water on the counter, knowing Erik would need it in the morning, she led the way outside.

The lighter clicked once, twice, three times before catching, and Jane cupped her other hand around the flame to block out the slight breeze as she held it to the kindling in the fire ring. Thankfully, the wood was plenty dry. Within moments, the tinder was engulfed and filling the immediate air with warmth.

Having retrieved some mid-sized logs from the woodpile nearby at her request, Thor deposited them beside the ring before circling around to sit in the chair to her left. He watched, silent, while she worked, stacking the pieces of wood in the growing fire. Only once she'd sat back and held her hands out to the heat did he speak.

"Is this your place of refuge?"

"I guess you could call it that." Fingers warm, she looped her hands around either elbow, rested them on her knees, and stared up into the inky darkness of the twilight sky. "I come up here sometimes when I can't sleep or when I'm trying to reconcile particle data or when Darcy's driving me crazy."

An evening of listening to the intern sing along with a song off her iPod had been the last straw of a particularly stressful day and had sent Jane in search of a quiet, secluded, song-free place where she could analyze readings. Being a small town, Puente Antiguo didn't offer very many options – after eight in the evening, it offered even less – which meant her only real choice had been between the rooftop and the local bar.
Needless to say, it had been an easy one to make.

Still, the roof had quickly become one of her favorite places.

It was where she'd retreat when she felt overwhelmed and needed space to reflect without any interruptions. Sometimes she'd think about work. Sometimes she'd think about how easy it was to hide in her work. Sometimes she'd even think about the things she hid from, the shadowed memories, the recurring dreams of fear and fire and fate. But every once in a while, she'd find herself sitting on the roof with nothing more to do than admire the infinite display of stars.

Jane chuckled. "I come up here a lot, actually, now that I think about it." In reality, she'd probably spent more nights on the roof than in the trailer.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Thor shift, the chair creaking with the movement. Only when she was absolutely sure he was more consumed with the fire than her did she stare at him outright.

His eyes shone brightly, reflected the flickering light that also transformed his hair from harvest-ready wheat to a burnished gold, but the pleasing effect was contradicted by a weary sort of tension that seemed to wind its way through his shoulders. They stooped forward, curled in on themselves, were bowed down as if the weight of a thousand worlds rested there. Though, based on some of the odd comments he'd made about realms and flying and rainbow bridges, maybe they did.

Or rather, he thought they did.

Because no matter what she'd said to Erik in the heat of the moment, she couldn't deny that the idea of advanced beings living in other realms was a hard pill to swallow.

And yet…

Jane's focus lowered from the scrape at his temple to his split lip to the bruised knuckles on the hands clasped between his knees, all souvenirs of his attack on the government base. Whatever Thor believed, he did so fully, with an unwavering conviction. No matter how ridiculous any of it sounded, he obviously considered it real enough to fight for.

Slowly, her attention slid the same path back to his face. Realizing she'd been caught staring when she met his eyes, she automatically looked away. It was after a few seconds and with a self-conscious chuckle that she glanced up, then down, then back up again.

"I'm really glad you're safe."

"You've been very kind to me." Thor's head dipped in an acknowledging, if not melancholy, nod. "And I've been far less grateful than you deserve."

In the beginning, it would've been easy to write him off as crazy, delusional. The majority of people wouldn't have hesitated to do so. But it was obvious he didn't have any friends or family in Puente Antiguo, and Jane knew better than most just how frightening it was to wake up alone. The first few days had hurt. Then despondency had set in until it felt like she'd been cast out to sea in a rowboat to survive on her own only to find herself with nothing, adrift in an endless ocean. No one deserved that.

"Well, I hit you with my car a couple times so I think that kind of evens things out."

"Perhaps I had it coming." Thor joining in with her laughter simultaneously helped ease some of the heaviness from the air and make her feel better, but the heavy edge to his tone hinted at something more.
A different laugh echoed from somewhere beneath them, followed by an off-key rendition of some bar song Jane didn't know. Her head turned in its general direction, lips curling at the especially flat note the man struck as the grand finale. It reminded her of the one time – because all it took was one time – she'd been convinced to take several rounds of tequila shots after a hard set of college finals.

She vaguely remembered strutting up to the stage to try her hand at karaoke. The memory of her roommate pulling her away after an unknown number of songs was even vaguer. Unfortunately – and somewhat typically – the remainder of the night she'd spent hugging the toilet was perfectly clear.

That was why Jane didn't drink tequila.

Though it did nothing to explain why just the smell of moonshine made her nauseous.

The quiet rustle of fabric on fabric caught her attention, and she glanced over to see Thor half-standing as he pulled something from his back pocket. In the brief glimpse she received, it was hard to tell what it was. Then he was sitting back down with another squeak from the chair and holding out an item that's binding swallowed the firelight, an item that looked just like…

"Oh my god." Jane took the proffered notebook and ran a hand down the black cover. "I don't believe it."

"It was all I could get back. I'm sorry it's not as much as I promised."

"No, no, this is great. This is…" Perfect. Amazing. Incredible. So much more than she could ever hope to repay. "I don't have to start from scratch now." There was no way Thor could possibly understand just how much it meant to have returned that particular notebook, but she sent him a beaming smile anyway. "Thank you."

Her fingers trembled with relief as she thumbed the pages. With little encouragement, the cover fell open in her lap, and she drank in the contents. If she'd been forced to choose one item out of all the things that had been taken to get back, this would've been it.

The stacks of notebooks that chronicled all the anomalies that had taken place over the years were mostly for informational purposes, the computer models could be redesigned, and the equipment could be rebuilt. This notebook, though… it was the one that contained the crucial aspects of her research and theories. In short, it was irreplaceable.

Excitement was electric in her throat and sent jolts of energy shooting through her body until her fingers had to tap out a hasty rhythm just to burn some of it off. But reality returned in a swallow – thick and hard and tasting of bitterness – to choke it all down.

Thor's head canted to one side at her sudden change in demeanor. "What's wrong?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D., whatever they are…" The book closed with a snap, and she traced the spine. "They're going to do everything in their power to make sure this research never sees the light of day."

Even if the agents had seemed content with confiscating her things, Jane doubted the organization would stand idly by and allow her to publish her findings if she ever did manage to complete her research. She was on their radar now. She'd probably always be on their radar.

"No, Jane, listen to me. You must not give up." The earnestness in his voice was stark. "You must finish what you've started."
Brown met blue as she studied his intent expression. "Why?"

"Because you're right. Here, look…"

Thor shifted closer, so close his thigh bumped against hers as he pulled the notebook from her slack grip. Flipping through the sheets, he eventually stopped on a page where she'd sketched out the different galaxies that had given off readings over the years. At the top were NGC 3079 and NGC 3310; then, a little closer, I Zwicky 18. Closer still were M101 and Messier 81, the nearest ones to where she'd drawn the Milky Way Galaxy at the bottom. There were others, too, galaxies she'd scribbled on the outskirts of the page when she'd obtained occasional signals, but she hadn't spent nearly as much time studying those.

"Your ancestors called it magic, and you call it science." Marking the spot with a finger, he retrieved the pen stuck between the pages farther back in the notebook. "Well, I come from a place where they're one and the same thing."

His head ducked lower as he began to trace out a design around the galaxies. Jane, however, was too consumed by the concentration evident in the lower lip caught between his teeth, the hint of excitement in his eyes to look away, and a smile played at the corners of her mouth while she took it all in.

Without warning, a chill that had nothing to do with the cool breeze and everything to do with what Thor had said swept through her as his words hit home.

Magic and science.

One and the same.

She'd been grasping at straws earlier that evening when she'd responded to Erik's skepticism with Arthur Clarke's claim of magic being science that hasn't been recognized yet. It was somewhat of a wild theory meant more for the dark ages than the current day considering magic didn't truly exist. But if magic did exist, if Thor had come from somewhere else… would it be possible?

With a mental shake, Jane leaned in to inspect the partial drawing. "What is that?"

"My father explained it to me like this…” He pointed first to the galaxies at the top of the page, and then zigzagged down through the rest. "That your world is one of the nine realms of the cosmos, linked to one another by the branches of Yggdrasil, the World's Tree."

A single eyebrow lifted at the strange terms, but she remained silent as he turned back a couple pages to where she'd pasted in pictures. Most of them were ones she'd taken herself at various points over the years. The rest were ones taken by other noted astrophysicists.

"Now, you see it every day without realizing. The images glimpsed through… what did you call it?" Thor gestured to one of the images. "This Hooble Telescope."

"Hubble." The picture was also one of hers, but that was beside the point.

"Hubble Telescope."

Having spent the majority of her memorable life in the scientific community, it was strange to be around someone that didn't know about the Hubble Telescope. In her line of work, everyone knew about it regardless of what country they lived in. Even her college roommates had known of it despite them pursuing different degrees.
So maybe it was some lingering confusion from when she'd hit him. Or maybe it was ignorance that could be blamed on his foreign accent. Or maybe it was nothing more than the fact that people less invested in the subject didn't care to know. Whatever the reason, she decided to ignore it in favor of leaning closer and propping her chin in her hand.

"Tell me more."

"So the nine realms…” The pen resumed its prior motions, darkened the lines of the World's Tree around the galaxies. "There is Midgard, which is Earth. There's Alfheim, Vanheim, Jötunheim, and Asgard." He paused over what was intended to be Messier 81. "That's where I come from."

Jane blinked, testing the weight of the strange names that felt strangely familiar on her tongue. One stuck out, though, more than any other. Reaching out, she touched a finger lightly to the circle that he'd called Midgard before moving to the one above it.

"Asgard?"

Thor nodded. "The Realm Eternal. The heart of Yggdrasil wherein resides Odin All-Father and those considered protectors of the nine realms."

"Odin." Withdrawing her hand, she stretched out to toss another log onto the fire and watched the subsequent display of sparks. "That, I recognize."

"You know of the king?"

The genuineness with which Thor asked the question didn't seem quite as peculiar when Jane took into account that they were discussing realms and world trees and ancient godlike beings. Their conversation was already deep into surreal territory anyway. So instead of pulling away from the magical universe he was creating, she followed him into it.

"Only through stories." Jane allowed her head to fall back as she surveyed the canopy of stars. "Erik used to tell them to me when we first met."

During her stay in the hospital, Erik had visited often. In the beginning, she'd insisted he leave because the last thing she wanted him to feel was any sort of obligation for her well-being, but her attempts had always been waved off. The potential isolation and silence she'd been faced with had been replaced with companionship and tales.

Jane's focus settled on Ursa Major out of habit. Having been the center of her studies for years, it was always the first place she seemed to look, even when her stargazing was only recreational. Now, staring at the combination of stars that comprised the Great Bear and talking about things that had long been buried in Nordic history, she wanted to laugh.

According to one of Erik's stories, the Vikings had originally believed Ursa Major to be a wagon and had referred to it as Odin's Wain. So for all of the readings over the past few years to have come from within the boundaries of the same constellation as well as a man who went by the name of Thor and believed himself to be from a mythological realm… it was all funny, in an ironic sort of way.

"You are very close to him."

Jane tilted her head just enough to get a glimpse of Thor in her peripheral vision but not enough to make out anything other than that he was focused on her. "Yes. He's helped me a lot over the years." Help was a relative term and a gross understatement when taking into account everything Erik had done for her.
"May I ask in what ways?" The motion of Thor leaning forward caught her eye, and her attention shifted from the sky to his fire-highlighted gaze, one perceptive enough to have read between the lines of her relatively innocent words.

"It's a long story and kind of complicated. You won't want to hear about it." The truth probably fell closer to her not being willing to share it. "This is all more interesting anyway."

Bizarre. Fanciful. Difficult to believe.

But still interesting.

"You said these realms are all connected within the World's Tree." Jane pulled the notebook from his hands, pointedly avoiding his eyes when their fingers brushed. "If that's true, can people travel between them?"

"Yes. The most common method of travel is by way of the Bi-Frost." The finger that had been folding and unfolding one edge of the page paused, and when her forehead creased in confusion, he clarified. "The Rainbow Bridge. Although, it would be a generalization to call all its travelers people. Aside from Æsir and Vanir, there are also dvargar, ljósálfar, and jötnar."

One eyebrow lifted in sync with her head, attention rising from the galaxies or realms or whatever they were to Thor who was now intent on some point in the distance. She remained silent while the foreign words tumbled across her tongue before reworking themselves into something she knew.


As the facts of what she'd just translated filtered in, Jane promptly filed them away in a drawer filled with things she stopped questioning a long time ago. Closing that drawer kept her from falling into the bottomless pit of her past. Out of sight, out of mind. So she tucked the facts between the time she'd woken up speaking Swedish and the time she'd understood everything a Russian exchange student had been saying and overlooked his last comment.

"Is that how you got here?"

His chin dipped in a shallow nod. "Along with a bit of magic."

Magic. Of course. It was what it all seemed to come back to. Naturally, every otherworldly aspect of their conversation could be easily explained by magic, except magic wasn't a reasonable explanation at all. Jane ran a hand through her hair, wincing when her fingers caught in a tangle courtesy of the wind.

"You still think me strange."

Remembering their conversation in the van earlier that day, she peeked at Thor between the strands of hair she was trying to unknot. "Yes, but only because what you're talking about is so…" The locks came loose and she tucked them behind her ear. "I'm a scientist. I believe in facts and evidence and proof, and the incident the other day gave me a lot to go on, but still… an Einstein-Rosen bridge connecting one point and another through space-time is one thing. An Einstein-Rosen bridge connecting two realms is…"

When she trailed off, gesturing indistinctly, Thor finished the thought she hesitated to verbalize with a good-natured smile. "Impossible?"

Jane shook her head and chuckled. "Alright, then, say all of this stuff is real… how does the Bi-Frost work?" It was a challenge more than an actual quest for answers, but ever the researcher, she
plucked the pen from Thor and flipped to an empty page in the back of the notebook just in case. "Does it transfer people intact or break the particles down to an atomic level and reform them once they've reached their destination? Or does it go even farther than that? Dematerializing to a quantum level, maybe?"

To her surprise, Thor simply laughed. "Jane Foster, you really are the most intelligent human in Midgard."

"Well assuming you did crash here from another realm, that means you've met all of fifteen people since you arrived, half of which were trying to beat you up because of that hammer ordeal. I don't think that's enough to make a judgment call like that, but I'll take the compliment anyway." Then she paused and lowered the pen. "Do you really not know how it works?"

"Where some have an aptitude for mental combat, my talents have always resided in those of a more physical nature." Thor used one log to poke at a half-burned one on the fire, brushed away a wayward ember when it landed on his sleeve. "Training, battles, war… those were the things that made my blood sing."

"So you've lived in Asgard your whole life and used the Bi-Frost multiple times, but you can't tell me how it operates? I think I've discovered the flaw in your story."

The wind picked up, and they both shielded their eyes from the sand in the gust. "No, you've merely discovered that I didn't pay attention in my studies as well as I should have and am unable to offer an explanation. My brother would be far more apt to giving you an answer than I would."

"Brother… right…" Jane didn't bother to hide the sarcasm laced through her voice or the skeptical look she gave him from beneath her hand, but she did bump his shoulder playfully with her own. "Convenient excuse."

"He is exceedingly intelligent." The ghost of a smile remained on Thor's lips, but his eyes were keen as they roamed the expanse of her face. "You remind me of him in many ways, actually."

For a moment, she considered keeping the conversation going, asking more about his realm, his life, his brother. But then she thought about it – really thought about it, of everything they had spent the last thirty minutes discussing – and dissolved into laughter.

It was a different sort of laugh. Not like the quiet ones from when she'd been humoring him with his story or the spirited ones when they'd joked about her hitting him with the van. No, this one was the kind that clawed its way up her throat and forced its way out unbidden, the kind that held the almost manic edge of bewilderment and left an acrid taste on her tongue because what they were talking about was exactly what Thor had said: impossible.

Einstein-Rosen bridges made scientific sense. They were something that could be proven by observations, data, and, once she had the chance to study one in depth without all her research being confiscated, calculations.

But realms? Gods? Mythological worlds that had been left in the Viking Age?

"Jane…" She reined in the last bits of laughter, wiped her eyes, and turned to Thor. "Is it so hard to believe?"

Pressing a fist to the ache in her side, Jane rotated on the chair, tucking her left foot beneath the opposite leg. She closed the notebook and set it on the ground behind her before twining her fingers together in her lap and fixing him with a serious expression.
"You say your name is Thor and that you're from a place called Asgard. Do you know what that means to people now?" Mouth tightening into a thin line, he shook his head. "They're myths. Stories. Nothing more than Viking-style fairytales."

"I assure you, they are not just stories."

"Erik grew up hearing all of the old Nordic tales, but that doesn't mean they're real." Jane leaned forward, lessening the space between them in a bid for him to see reason. "The Vikings believed Thor to be the God of Thunder. Are you telling me, then, that you're a god?"

His knee bumped hers when he also turned to face her. "That was a term given to us by mortals, not one we applied ourselves."

"Mortals? Mortals?" The absurdity of it had Jane raking her fingers through her hair for a second time. "Does that mean you're immortal?"

"I was, yes, before…" Thor's words trailed off just as his eyes did, shifting to some point over her shoulder and drifting out of focus, lost in the depths of a memory.

After a few seconds, she prompted him. "Before?"

He blinked, thoughts returning to the present and gaze flicking back to hers. "Before I was banished. That is why I am here, Jane, why you found me at that site. I acted foolhardily and have been sentenced to spend the remainder of my life as a mortal in Midgard."

There was an openness to his expression, a sad sort of resignation that cut off any challenging retort she might have said. Instead, the words amended themselves into something half-joking, half-serious.

"Well, I guess that answers my next question."

One of the thoughts that had been forming in the back of Jane's mind was to demand a trip to Asgard. If the Bi-Frost was real and had sent Thor through what was essentially an Einstein-Rosen bridge to crash-land in the middle of the New Mexico desert, then surely he'd be able to prove its authenticity by taking her on a similar trip.

It would've been quick, simple, the easiest way to convince her. But now that option was obviously out, and the fact that she was even thinking about the current situation in terms of convincing and options had her laughing all over again as she folded over to rest her forehead against Thor's knee that was butted up to the end of hers.

Maybe the rest of the scientific community was right when they ridiculed her.

Jane absentmindedly picked at a stray thread, determined not to let her colleagues snubbing get to her. It took constant effort, though. She'd heard too many things through the grapevine over the years.

At first, she felt nothing but the rough fabric of jeans beneath her head, the warmth of the fire against one cheek, and the cold edge of winter against the other. Then – and it took her a few seconds to fully realize it – she felt the soft glide of fingers through her hair.

Not until they were halfway down the strands did he speak. "What's wrong, Jane?"

Technically everything, but…

"Nothing." She shook her head, nose brushing against her jeans, sight a blur of denim. "I just think
you're either a very good actor or potentially delusional. Maybe I hit you harder than I thought.”
With a tired sigh, she sat up, feeling the slight tug of Thor's fingers as they pulled free from her hair.
"You paint a pretty picture of the universe, though. I'll give you that."

"Words cannot do it justice. When you have unraveled the secrets of your studies, you'll see for
yourself." Jane breathed deeply, inhaling and exhaling in one smooth motion, but then she noticed
his lips quirk and raised an eyebrow. "Since I have no hope of convincing you of my candor, can
you at least tell me if you've taken a stance? Good strange or bad strange?"

Thor was strange. There was no doubt about it.

However, there were many levels to being strange.

Erik refused to mix his foods during a meal – one thing had to be eaten first before he would move
on to the next – and Darcy always washed her hands twice – three times if she'd just finished a cup
of coffee. Jane was no exception either. Her morning routine was the exact same every day, no
exceptions to order or length.

So yes, everyone was strange to some degree, but as she studied Thor with his easygoing smirk and
honest eyes, she was absolutely, one hundred percent certain that it wasn't a bad strange, off-the-wall
ideas or not.

Instead of answering, though, Jane caught her lower lip between her teeth, dipped her head to hide
the telling grin she couldn't prevent, and backtracked. "If everything you've said is true, it must be
awful to be away from your family and friends."

"I miss them, and Midgard was once a far more welcoming realm…” The wind teased a lock of hair
out from behind her hear to play, and Thor reached out and tucked it back in place, fingers lingering
a split-second too long before falling away. "But it has its advantages."

There was light that cast shadows on the insides of her eyelids and the groan of wood settling and a
persistent pain on her right hipbone from her belt and the quiet sigh of wind in her ear and the
scratchy wool of the blanket against her cheek.

"I've been a fool. I want nothing more than for things to be made right again, but things have
progressed too far to be corrected. If only time could be rewound. If I could just go back and change
things, I would…”

There was discomfort and dejection and despondency and dozens of other things, feelings she knew,
sentiments she didn't, emotions that were both nameless and unidentifiable in their ambiguity.

"I understand, though. I understand why, now, and there's none to blame but myself."

And as Jane burrowed deeper beneath the blanket's warmth and drifted back towards her dreams, she
could've sworn she heard something that sounded like the magnetometer on the far side of the roof
issue a single, solitary beep. It didn't make sense, because after sixteen straight days of anomalies
predictable down to the second, the equipment had been completely silent since Thor had crashed his
way into her life.

But then, as she took one last peek through her lashes at the fire-silhouetted form that was Thor
sitting on the edge of the chair and staring up into the infinite sky, there was no way for her to know that four and a half miles outside of Puente Antiguo, S.H.I.E.L.D.’s equipment registered a single spike of energy as a speck of sand trickled from beneath a hammer borne in the heart of a dying star.

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – for those of you that might not know, Puente Antiguo, the site of all the activity in the first movie, actually means ‘old bridge’ in Spanish. I wasn’t aware of that for the longest time, so I wanted to share it with any others that might not have known since it’s a very fitting detail.

Also, Ursa Major really was believed to be a wagon and was called Odin’s Wain during the Viking Age. How ironic that all of the readings Jane has been getting center in that area of the sky. Coincidence? You tell me.

On a separate note… one of my biggest criticisms with the first Thor movie was the lack of depth the writers gave Jane. For someone that was introduced as a driven astrophysicist, she was quick to dissolve into a moon-eyed girl when Thor appeared. I kept the dialogue from the movie the same, but you might have noticed a difference in the tone of things throughout the chapter. A giggling Jane just doesn’t fit into the Jane of this story, lost memories or not, but I still wanted to find the middle ground between movie-verse Jane and TWOTW-verse Jane.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
2011: Puente Antiguo, United States

Chapter Notes

One of the main questions, I think, on everyone’s mind is when Loki will be coming back. I can say that he absolutely will show up in the next chapter – you’ll see how at the end of this one – and that the chapter after that will be from his perspective. Exciting stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty

“We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that death will tremble to take us.”

2011: Puente Antiguo, United States

New Mexico was chilly with the promise of winter. Exhales were wisps of smoke, ghosts that hovered in the air before dissolving into nothingness, and Jane woke slowly to chirping birds, the entry bell at Isabela's diner, cold fingers, and Thor.

Full awareness was a gradual thing, so she spent the moments in between studying him. Stretched out on the chair, partially covered by the thinner of the two blankets, hair falling across eyes still closed in sleep… Thor was directly opposite her, so close their chairs were touching, which meant he must have pulled them together sometime during the night.

But the chairs weren't the only things touching.

Tucking one set of cold fingers between the folds of the blanket, Jane breathed warm air into the space. When she prepared to do the same with the other hand, though, she realized it actually wasn't that cold. Or alone. Or easily retrievable.

Her focus lowered from the peaceful smoothness around Thor's eyes to the scruff lining his jaw to the hand loosely holding hers. It felt surreal, staring at their cradled hands, the fingers lacing their way between her own while his thumb curled into her palm. She'd never had an out-of-body experience before – that she knew of, at least – but if she had to wager, she'd bet it felt a lot like this.

Without warning, his fingers twitched, thumb picking up a pattern as it stroked from the middle of her palm to the heel of her hand. "Good morning."

She looked up just in time to see a sliver of blue disappear behind dark lashes and the contented curl of his mouth. "Mmm…” Her voice sounded strange in her ears, scratchy with disuse and sleep. "Morning."
"I trust you slept well?"

"Great." Rolling onto her back, Jane tested the lethargic weight of her limbs and pointed her toes in a stretch. "Better than great, actually." She tried to think of the last time she'd felt so relaxed or well-rested. She did not think about the split-second where Thor's fingers tightened before allowing her hand to slip free of his. "You?"

"Very well." Copying her movements, Thor rotated to his back as well. "Far better than in that Midgardian infirmary that—"

"Hospital." His head fell her way at the interruption, but she stared resolutely into the cloudless sky, the sun burning away the blue until she was forced to close her eyes. Even then, she could see the globe outlined against the black. "It's called a hospital, and this is Earth. Even if you're telling the truth about the realms and being banished, you'll still need to talk like a normal person."

"As you wish."

Jane's eyes flew open. The answer was so accommodating, so… compliant. To say she was instantly suspicious would be an understatement, especially judging by the innocent look on his face when she glanced over. The only sign of something else going on was an almost imperceptible quirk of his lips that was just a shade too playful.

When she sat up, the blanket pooled in her lap. "No more trying to convince me that you're not crazy?" After his persistence the night before, it seemed uncharacteristic.

"Would you believe me even if I did?" Thor crossed his arms beneath his head.

In the end, that was really what it all boiled down to, whether or not she could believe him. All of his claims were things the world deemed impossible, but then, what was normal about the things that had been happening recently? In the span of approximately – Jane pushed back her jacket sleeve to check her watch – twenty-five and a half hours, normality had descended into one confusing detail after another.

Unnatural anomaly?

Check.

Secretive government agency seizing years' worth of research?

Check.

Random man claiming to be a one-time mythical god from another realm appearing, literally, from nowhere?

Check.

The relative peace and quiet of Puente Antiguo had been substituted for a mess of strange activity and a plethora of visitors who stood out painfully against the rest of the townspeople. It was too much at one time to be chance and lent weight to the idea that something bigger was going on. Like she'd said before, coincidence could only explain so much. The impervious walls of science were beginning to crumble, the hard facts now buckshot with what if.

With a deliberating sigh, Jane raked a hand through her hair. She wanted explanations no matter which theory they supported, but she couldn't deny that an event-free morning would be a nice change of pace after the past few days. So instead of diving into their conversation head-first, she
settled on agreeing to disagree.

"Good point."

"And here I was expecting you to convince me of my delusions." Thor's grin widened when she swatted his upper arm.

Settling back into the chair, Jane crossed her legs and rearranged the blanket around them, tucking the edges beneath her. "The option's not completely out." She began to pull the remainder of the blanket up to her shoulders. "I could always recon— oh, no."

Disturbed by her movements, the notebook that had been balancing precariously on the end of the chair slid off, and she was just a fraction of a second too late in leaning forward to catch it, the tips of her fingers just brushing the binding before it fell out of reach. She was in the process of unfurling her legs when Thor beat her to it and retrieved the item himself.

Picking up the notebook, he sat at the end of the chair with his back to her. Through the triangular slice between his torso, his arm, and his thigh, Jane watched the cover fall open across his hand, the sheets following suit and settling on a specific page. Circular rings, sloping branches… she was just able to make out their diagram before Thor spoke.

"It is interesting, though."

She perused the broad expanse of his back, the curl of his shoulders as he intently studied the notebook. "What, that I'm struggling to believe you really are one of Norway's ancient gods?"

"No." Thor paused. Then he smirked over his shoulder. "Well, that too, I suppose… but I meant in regards to believing in the existence of other realms." Before she could do more than open her mouth and inhale her reply, Thor faced her completely and held out the notebook still open to the drawing. "You maintain the idea is impossible and yet you have included Yggdrasil in your book of science."

"Technically it's a book of hypotheses until I can prove them true." The skepticism Jane felt was clear on her face, in the wry quirk of her mouth and her sharp gesture to the sketch. "And those are just galaxies in deep space."

Nonplussed, Thor continued to smile. "You mean realms."

"No, I mean galaxies." She flipped to one of the pictures of Messier 81. "They're massive, gravitationally bound systems of stars, stellar remnants, dark matter, and an interstellar medium of gas and dust." Then she turned back to the page still marked by his thumb. "You're the one who drew the tree around them trying to make them realms, not me."

Thor looked down at the notebook, brow slightly furrowed as he traced one finger along the lines he'd drawn. "So you mean to say you had no knowledge of Yggdrasil when you charted these… galaxies?"

"That's correct."

Silence welled between them for a moment while Thor continued to stare at the illustration with such concentration Jane could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. Whatever line of thought he was travelling, it was obviously an important one.

He rested his elbows on his knees. "Tell me, Jane, are these systems accurately placed in relation to one another?"
It's hard to scale down a galaxy that's light years in diameter." The breadth of Messier 81 was approximately ninety-two thousand light years. M101 spanned over one hundred seventy thousand. "But yes, their general placement to each other should be relatively accurate."

"Then there is an uncanny similarity between your galaxies and Yggdrasil."

Jane issued a patient sigh. "How so?"

"Their depiction, for one." When she leaned forward, Thor held the notebook to the side so they could both see it. "Asgard, Jötunheim, and Muspelheim are realms of average size. And where Midgard is significantly smaller, Niflheim is a vast realm."

"Okay…"

"Second is their structure. Each of these galaxies are placed precisely the same as the nine realms. Asgard, Svartalfheim, Niðavellir, Midgard…” He pointed to four different galaxies in turn. "Your drawing exactly matches their basic arrangement within Yggdrasil."

With one set of fingers drumming out a repeated rhythm on her thigh, Jane absentmindedly nibbled at the opposite thumbnail as she considered everything. It was a remarkable happenstance. She was open-minded enough to admit that. But there was one crucial flaw in what he was saying that brought the rest of his claims to a halt.

"Except this isn't Earth or Midgard or whatever you want to call it." Jane moved Thor's finger from where it was pressed to I Zwicky 18 near the top of the page down to the Milky Way at the very bottom. "This is."

Since the galaxies that had given off readings over the years extended away from Earth in the same general direction, it made sense for the Milky Way to be at the bottom of the drawing. Start at one point, and chart everything out from there based on relative distance. Placing the Milky Way in the middle of the page where Thor believed it to be was ridiculous.

"No…” Thor frowned, confused. "That isn't right."

"I hate to break it to you, but yes, that is right." Straightening, Jane stretched her arms above her head. "These galaxies have been at the core of my research for the past ten years. There are a lot of things I don't understand, but this…” She nodded to the notebook. "This, I know."

"How, then, do you explain the similar size of the galaxies in your drawing to that of the nine realms or their identical arrangement? Would you cast it off as mere chance? A coincidence?" With a knowing smile, he shook the notebook insistently. "You do not realize what you have here, Jane. Among all the mortals in this realm, you alone have the truth – the real truth – in your possession."

The resolve in Thor's eyes was unnerving. Or maybe it was the sensation in her stomach, the tangy allure of knowledge combined with a kind of weightlessness like she was falling without a parachute, tumbling endlessly down the rabbit hole to Wonderland.

And just like Wonderland, nothing made sense.

Except for the few places it did.

Jane's gaze lowered and slid to the side at the familiar sound of Erik and Darcy. Their voices came from the street below, growing ever louder as they approached the lab and arguing all the way – if questioned, Darcy would maintain they were only debating – on what to eat for breakfast. When the front door of the lab closed, she turned back to Thor who was staring at her expectantly.
She couldn't speak to the accuracy of the rest of the diagram, but what Thor assumed to be Midgard was not. With its high rate of star formation, relatively small size, and principal makeup of hydrogen and helium, I Zwicky 18 was nothing like the Milky Way Galaxy.

But then… was it possible for the similarities between what Thor believed and what she’d sketched to be a fluke? Honestly, what were the odds? There were hundreds of things yet to be discovered about the universe. People were learning something new every day. So if other realms did exist, perhaps the explanation was that they had a different perspective on galactic placement than her own based on their position. Or maybe the overall orientation was off. What if there really wasn't an up or down in space?

It was eccentric, though, and frustrated with not being able to scientifically explain it, Jane fell back on the largest detail lending to her reservations.

"Then why is it wrong?" The notebook slid easily from his grip, and she looked at the drawing. "If this is supposed to be reality, why doesn't everything match?"

"Maybe some things were lost in translation or maybe we only think we have the correct answer when, really, none of us do." One shoulder rose and fell in a half-shrug. "I couldn't say." Thor smiled apologetically. "Once again, my brother would be better suited to answering than I."

It was the second time he'd mentioned having a brother, both in moments where technicalities were needed, and she wondered what the chances were of her ever encountering the mysterious person who apparently had all the answers. That was, if he even existed.

With a muffled groan, Thor stood up and stretched. "I would expect the Norns to be laughing at our expense right now as we try to figure everything out, especially considering it is impossible to know what they have in store."

Jane blinked. The drawing blurred into a mess of fuzzy lines and blobs as she lost focus, and her head shot up after a moment, mouth falling slack. The jerking motion seemed to catch Thor's eye because he immediately turned from the rooftop-view of Puente Antiguo to her.

Mistaking her reaction for confusion, he began to explain. "The Norns—"

"Dictate the fates of the world."

Jane's mouth snapped closed in the aftermath of the words that had come out of their own accord even as Thor confirmed it with a shallow nod. "Yes, they do. Did Erik tell you of them as well?"

"I…" Unsure, she trailed off.

Had that been part of some story Erik had told her during the past ten years? She couldn't remember exactly, but there didn't seem to be any other explanation. Except… she could trace the unsettling feeling of what she'd said back to the black wall in the back of her mind, could almost see the path from where they'd leaked out of the darkness.

That was all that had come out, though, knowledge on the responsibilities of a group of beings steeped in Nordic mythology. Jane paused again. But if that was all that had come out, how did she know that the Norns were mythical beings at all? Confused, she dropped the notebook and lowered her head into her hands.

Did she explore the potential opening into her past?

Or did she run from it, bury herself in her research like she was prone to do?
"Jane?" A hand settled onto her shoulder, weighty and warm against the chill that had slowly crept its way into her bones, and she looked up to see Thor regarding her, concern in his eyes.

"Yeah…” She swallowed around the lie in her throat. "I guess Erik did tell me about them." Following his lead, she crawled to her feet, pushed aside the turbulent chaos in her mind, and decided a change of subject would be best. "Come on, I'm sure you're hungry. Let's go see what Erik and Darcy made for breakfast."

Yet, as she followed Thor to the stairs at the far end of the roof, she couldn't help but look back over her shoulder to the notebook still lying on the chair. It called to her, beckoned with an invisible finger that promised answers to questions she didn't know how to phrase, couldn't begin to describe even if she wanted to.

There were gaping holes in what Thor had talked about where logic had been replaced with blind faith. Realms, gods, mythology come to life… no normal scientist would believe anything he'd said.

But then, no scientist had ever called Jane Foster normal.

"Look who slept in. On the rooftop. Together."

Trailing a few steps behind Thor, Jane stood on her tiptoes to shoot Darcy a pointed glare with a very clear message over his shoulder. However, obediently falling silent was pointless when the intern gave a look of her own as they passed, one that also contained a blatant message written in her smug grin and raised eyebrows.

Doing her best to ignore the expression she could still see even though she was desperately trying not to, Jane slid into the chair beside Erik who was staring vacantly at the coffee cup in front of him. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, considering." He fingered the handle of the cup before wrinkling his nose and pushing it away. "It could always be worse."

"Way to see the positive side of things, Dr. Selvig. That's really good." Darcy took the empty seat directly across from Jane and to Erik's right. "Because I was going to say that, if you thought this was bad, there was one time I got drunk and—"

Jane leaned over just enough to catch the intern's eye, shook her head sharply, and breathed a silent sigh of relief when it seemed to do the trick, effectively cutting off the story. The last thing Erik needed right then was to hear about the time Darcy claimed she forgot how to speak English and was stuck trying to direct the taxi driver back to her apartment in French or the time she woke up the morning after with a parking meter in her bedroom and no knowledge of how it got there or the time she snuck onto the Jamestown-Scotland Ferry on a dare only to fall asleep in the boiler room for an entire night.

"I… um…” Getting the hint, Darcy folded her hands around her own coffee cup and brought it to her lips, mumbling around the ceramic. "Well, I guess that's not important."

"Thanks for the painkillers, by the way." Erik offered the most appreciative smile he could probably manage in his current condition.
"No problem. You'll feel even better after you eat something." To the right, Jane spotted Thor examining a skillet on the stove before moving to the carton of eggs on the counter and looking to her sheepishly when they slipped from his grasp back to the counter. "Unless you already have?"

Darcy tilted her head in Erik's direction. "I wasn't sure if everyone was ready for food yet."

The unspoken if you know what I mean was clear in Darcy's expression even without her impression of someone throwing up. Judging by the pallor of Erik's skin, he needed something in his stomach to ease him back to normalcy, so after a reassuring pat on Erik's arm, Jane made her way to where Thor was now reading the list of ingredients on a loaf of bread, turned on the burner beneath the skillet, and pulled out a mixing bowl.

Breakfast was a quick ordeal of scrambled eggs, toast, and breakfast sausage. It would've been even quicker if Thor hadn't asked to help crack eggs – a complete disaster – or make toast – only two slices were burnt beyond repair – or help wash dishes – the plates made it through intact, but dishwater splashed onto the floor on more than one occasion.

But even if the assistance wasn't necessarily needed, the company was nice.

And if Thor's fingers lingered just a second too long against hers when he took a plate from her or trailed across her lower back when he passed behind her, she didn't complain.

Once breakfast was finished, Jane sat back down, this time across from Erik. She tried not to watch him swallow the last few sips of orange juice, but the fact that she was pointedly looking everywhere except at him coupled with the beat her fingers had taken up gave away her anxiousness. With a sigh, Erik set the glass down, crossed his arms on the table, and met her gaze.

"Alright, what is it?"

Denial was pointless. Still, Jane couldn't help but paste on a mask of innocence. "What's what?"

"What's got you so worked up? And don't even bother trying to play it cool." Erik knew her too well to be fooled. "I can practically feel your excitement. You're humming with it."

Giving in to the idea that had been tickling the back of her mind the entire time she was cooking and cleaning up was easy, and it was with an eager grin that Jane leaned forward, slid the glasses out of the way, and pulled the notebook she'd gone back to retrieve from the chair from the inside pocket of her jacket.

Opening it to the drawing, she recounted their conversation from that morning, detailing the uncanny similarities between the sketch of the galaxies that had given off bursts of activity over the years and the World's Tree Thor had drawn between them. To his credit, Erik listened without saying anything or even mirroring the dubious looks she'd given Thor when hearing the same information. Only after all the information had been laid out on the table did he inhale deeply.

"Do you realize how this sounds?"

"Crazy, I know, but think about it Erik." Jane spared a glance for Thor and Darcy to make sure they were out of earshot on the other side of the room. "He knows nothing about my research. Literally nothing. So how could he have just made something like this up?"

With a long-suffering sigh, Erik went to refill his coffee cup. "I think you're too trusting of other people. For all you know, he could be another astrophysicist trying to misguide you or some homeless person off the—"
"He's telling the truth."

Jane's voice rang loudly in the silence that followed her declaration. Even Thor and Darcy had gone quiet. Coffee pot still in hand, Erik turned, studied her carefully, and she crossed her arms and lifted her chin defiantly at the weight of his regard. She'd received enough judgment from the rest of her peers over the years. She didn't need it from him as well.

When Thor took a step forward, moving inward from the far edges of her sight, her gaze drifted to his, to the faint smile on his face. "Or at least, what he believes to be the truth."

"It's a beautiful theory, Jane." Erik scratched the back of his neck. "But you won't be able to convince the scientific community, not without hard evidence."

It wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion, and she doubted it would be the last. But before she could either reluctantly agree or refute his claim or just fall silent and let things be – she hadn't quite decided which option was preferable yet – a knock came from behind her.

"Found you!"

In the moment before Jane turned, she watched Erik's mouth fall open as the coffee cup slipped from his hand to shatter against the linoleum. The dark liquid splattered onto her jeans while the rest of it flowed towards the tips of her boots. Once she'd caught sight of who had spoken, though, she didn't care about the puddle of coffee or the slivers of ceramic that littered the floor.

The door was flung wide, and Jane took an involuntary step back. "My friends!" Her attention shot to Thor as he strode forward to embrace one of the men while three other people clapped him on the shoulders and back.

Everything about the four newcomers was… well, different was the nicest way to put it. The most interesting was that they were dressed in armored suits complete with shields and weapons. Even the woman was outfitted in a warrior's costume. Or were they costumes? After all, the sword strapped to one of the men's side looked real enough, light glinting off its razor-sharp edge.

Darcy's sudden appearance at Jane's left shoulder made her jump. However, Erik didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off Thor's supposed friends. "I don't believe it." His hands were still held out, cupped around an invisible coffee mug that had fallen over two minutes ago.

"Oh, excuse me." Having finally noticed them, the first man Thor had hugged turned their way and gestured behind him to the rest of the group. "The Lady Sif and the Warriors Three."

Erik choked on air.

Darcy waved a silent greeting.

Jane just gaped open-mouthed at Thor who shrugged before looking away. "My friends, I have never been happier to see anyone, but you should not have come."

In the background, a solitary beep sounded from the magnetometer stashed in the corner. It was only one, but it was enough to cut through the surreal feeling that permeated the lab. Without averting her eyes, Jane turned her head in the direction of the equipment, half-listening to the conversation taking place.

Darcy leaned close enough to whisper. "So what do you think of these guys? That realm-on-the-other-side-of-the-bridge thing is sounding pretty plausible now. God, I love it when I'm right."

Fisting a hand in a personal show of triumph, she sighed happily. "Should I tell Erik? I'm gonna tell
Erik.

"No," Jane grabbed the intern's arm to keep her in place, shook her head, and repeated. "No." The last thing Erik needed to hear was *I told you so* when he already looked like he was on the verge of a breakdown.

"Ugh, fine." Darcy pulled away, rocking back onto her heels and sullenly crossing her arms. "The one time I'm right and I can't tell anyone…typical."

A second beep came from the magnetometer, followed by a third a few moments later. When Jane glanced over, she saw the screen on the machine that measured particle data light up, the dial jumping erratically.

"Well, if I can't rub my rightness in Erik's face, do you mind if I call dibs on the other blonde guy?" Darcy's face found its way into Jane's line of sight, cutting off the view of the equipment. "He seems nice, and by *seems* I mean *looks*. No reason for you to have all the fun."

Struggling to keep up with the conversation, Jane frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Darcy nodded towards the group near the door. "The thing you have going on with Thor."

"There's no *thing* going on."

"Oh, there's definitely a *thing*." The smirk easing across Darcy's face caused Jane's frown to deepen all the more, but denial crept up her neck unbidden and stained her cheeks a telling red. "Anyway, is that a yes because—"

"Jane, are you listening to this?" Grateful for a way out of the discussion, Jane turned to Erik who was still observing Thor and his friends. "They're talking about all of this stuff like they're serious, like it's…" He fell silent, unable to actually say it.

But Erik's hesitancy was Darcy's opportunity, and she took advantage of the opening Jane had denied her before anyone could say otherwise, leaning forward to stage whisper with lips curled in a smug grin. "Like it's what? Real?"

"My father is dead because of me." There was a brittle edge to Thor's voice that drew Jane's attention, a brokenness that felt incongruent with someone who had been willing to fight his way into a government-restricted area. It was the raw undercurrent that accompanied a hurt not yet healed, and she wondered how recently his father had passed away. "I must remain in exile."

The magnetometer's sporadic beeping settled into a steady rhythm of once every five seconds, then four, then three. No one else appeared to notice, caught up in the reunion, but Jane was too attuned to her equipment to ignore it. So when the beeping increased until it was in time with the second hand of the clock, Jane spun around and made her way to the table.

The needle on the dial bounced high on the scale, hovering in extremes marked by red.

"Thor, your father still lives."

Lines swirled in a circular pattern around the screen that showcased a virtual display of atmospheric activity.

"What?" The tension in Thor's question was unmistakable. "But Loki…"

Suddenly, the magnetometer's beeping dissolved into a steady, high-pitched whine that refused to be
ignored. It was only the second time the machine had ever made that sound, the first being the day they met Thor. With the arrival of his strange friends that were assumedly from Asgard as well, coincidence was becoming less and less plausible.

Focus glued to the screen still in hand, Jane crossed the room, ignored the surprised looks as she squeezed between hard plates of armor, and threw open the front door. And she couldn't even find it in herself to be amazed at the dark, spinning clouds on the outskirts of town, the funnel that began to stretch towards the ground.

She eased out of the doorway and stepped outside when everyone crowded into the narrow space. Thor eventually came to stand beside her on the sidewalk, the rest of his group flanking them while Darcy and Erik remained near the door. They stood there in silence, watching as the cyclone dotted with rainbow-hued lights connected with the ground in an explosion of dust and sand.

"Was somebody else coming?"

At Darcy's question, Jane glanced up at Thor. An unexplainable apprehension gnawed at her, but any reassurance she might have hoped for was cast aside at the muscle that jumped in his jaw as he clenched his teeth. It was answer enough.

The funnel receded back into the sky, leaving them in a ringing silence as the magnetometer inside went quiet. The screen in her hand had gone blank as well. Only two hours ago, she would've argued that it was impossible for anyone to travel through an event like that, but now... there were too many contradicting variables that all seemed to point to and suggest the impossible.

A loud crash sounded in the distance, quickly followed by yelling and gunfire. Not long after, a figure appeared down the street, something twice the size of a normal human being, something that gleamed brightly in the mid-morning sun.

Thor moved in front of her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Jane, you have to leave."

"What are you going to do?" When her attempts to peek around him to whatever was approaching failed, she refocused on the combination of determination and urgent concern in his expression.

"I'm staying here."

One of his friends – the other blonde that Darcy had been eyeing – slid into view with an eager, wide smile. "Thor's going to fight with us."

Thor looked over Jane's head. "My friends, I am just a man. I'll only be in the way, or worse, get one of you killed." The rest of the citizens who had been watching began to scream and scatter as another crash came from much closer, and Thor's hand drifted down her arm, shoulder to elbow to wrist before falling away completely as he began to step around her. "But I can help get these people to safety."

The loss of Thor's presence revealed what he'd been hiding: an enormous automaton that was systematically destroying Puente Antiguo. Light erupted from the place where a face would normally be and sent a car flying while people screamed and dodged projectiles in the street.

The town was descending into chaos.

Leaving would be wise.

But before Thor went more than two steps, Jane reached out on impulse and caught his wrist. "If you're staying, so am I."
She left no room for argument in the statement. How could she when there was a fire erupting in her veins and propelling her forward? The blaze burned away the fears and doubts that had burrowed their way into the secret places of her heart and filled the hollow spaces that remained with sensations she knew and didn't know at the same time.

It was responsibility, and in the split-second darkness of a blink, she saw a ruined village and an approaching ship. It was resolve, and the next blink revealed a moonlit ocean, an endless stretch of white sand, and a chest beneath a plant. It was strength, and in the last blink she saw a series of images in rapid-fire… a dark figure skirting across the end of an alleyway, wrists with jutting tendons framing either side of her face, hollowed eye sockets rimmed in black, the smooth expanse of a chest beneath her.

Crumbling mortar pulled Jane from the visions that had felt eerily real, just a little too substantial, and back to the present. The automaton was drawing closer. Along with Thor, she ushered the nearest group of people towards the opposite side of town with a glance over her shoulder. It was now only four blocks away.

"Go." The word was accompanied by a slight push in the opposite direction, but Jane stood motionless, staring down the street to where the woman they called Lady Sif crouched behind a car. "Now."

The machine had been defeated. She’d watched the spear plunge straight through its neck in what should have been a death blow. Instead, the automaton – or Destroyer as Thor had dubbed it in passing – had come back to life to continue its path of devastation, scattering cars and people and buildings as if it were nothing.

It felt like she was watching a movie.

Except this was reality.

"Jane." She started at the slight brush of fingertips across her cheekbone and met Thor's gaze with wide eyes. Their calmness despite the pandemonium surrounding them helped to ground her. "Run."

Before her mind could catch up to what was happening, a firm hand wrapped around her upper arm and tugged her backwards, and she struggled to keep her footing as she was essentially hauled down the street. Her energy was slow to return. However, at the first traces of it filtering back, she yelled out to the retreating Thor. He bore Sif's shield for protection, but she’d seen what the Destroyer was capable of and doubted a thin sheet of metal – forged in another realm or not – would be very effective.

The window to their right exploded in a shower of glass, and Jane heard Darcy scream as everyone ducked to avoid the worst of it. They couldn't escape all of it, though, and Jane felt the sting as shards of glass found their way beneath her skin in several places.

"Are you alright, Lady Jane?"

She looked up to see the red-haired man helping her back up. Volstagg, wasn't that what Thor had said? "I… I'm fine." It was the truth if she didn't count the glass embedded in the back of her hands and forearms or the slow drag of her muscles around the last traces of adrenaline or the knot in the pit of her stomach.
Immediately, Volstagg began to steer her through the fray. But then she heard it. Around the crackling fire, the yelling, and the general sound of destruction, Jane heard the dull clatter of the shield against the broken pieces of asphalt, and over her shoulder she saw an empty-handed Thor approach the Destroyer.

"Wait..." Through sheer force of will, she pulled Volstagg to a stop. "What's he doing?"

Time seemed to slow as Thor made his way towards the automaton. She could just pick up the low timbre of his voice but couldn't decipher the words. Whatever he was saying must have had some impact, though, because the next thing she knew, the furnace-glow that made up the Destroyer's face ebbed, then disappeared behind metal plating.

For one timeless moment, relief flooded through her as the Destroyer turned away.

But relief hardened into ice in her veins as the Destroyer spun around and backhanded Thor.

"No!"

Jane pulled her arm free, not even wincing at the scrape of blunt fingernails when Volstagg tried to hang on, and sprinted forward. The sickening crunch of bone echoed in her head. She tried to push it aside, concentrating instead on Thor, but she felt just as sick when he tumbled across the ground before finally sliding to a stop.

"Thor!" Jane disregarded the Destroyer which was now withdrawing and fell to her knees in a spray of sand, leaning over him while her hands flitted nervously over the wounds that covered his face and torso. Registering something damp, she looked down to see her fingertips stained red with blood. "Thor?"

Slowly, his eyes opened, blankly tracked the progress of a pair of ravens circling overhead for a moment. When his focus shifted to her, one corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. "It's over."

The taste of iron settled on her tongue, and Jane automatically released the lip she didn't even realize she'd been biting. "It's not over."

"I mean, you're safe." Thor's eyes slipped closed, his smile faltering, fading. "It's over."

"No..." Desperately shaking his shoulders, her vision blurred with tears when the only response she received was the boneless flop of his head to one side. "No..."

It wasn't right. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. If they really were dealing with realms and gods and mythical things, why was the God of Thunder laid out motionless before her, battered and broken, blood-stained, not smiling or speaking or breathing?

Without warning, there was a blast in the distance, followed by a steady hum. Tucking her hair behind her ear, Jane saw an object shoot up from some point outside of town and arch high into the sky, leaving a white trail in its wake. She watched its progress for a moment before returning to Thor. However, the minute she made contact with his shoulder again, she was struck still.

A shock cut through her like she'd just touched a live wire, and she jerked back instantly, electricity dancing along her hands and up her arms. It was similar to that haunting sensation she'd felt three days prior when she'd first encountered Thor in the middle of the runes, only magnified hundredfold. Her teeth clenched at the winding current she felt, tightened so hard she worried they would crack beneath the pressure. It coursed through her body in search of an outlet, but she couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't...
Erik’s footsteps registered through a haze of sparks.

"Jane!"

A bruising grip hauled her to her feet.

"Come on! Now!"

And just when she thought the power that had fused itself to her nerve endings would ignite and set her on fire, the object in the sky slammed into Thor in a blinding display of lightning.

Jane staggered against Erik and threw an arm over her face, but the jagged streaks were already seared to the inside of her eyelids, white-hot lines rimmed in blue. The buildup of voltage leaked out through her pores, drawn to an overwhelming energy in the atmosphere that made the hair on her arms stand on end along with the strands at the nape of her neck.

Hesitantly, she cracked one eye to see her hand had become a black silhouette from the light in the background. Lightning continued to crackle over the rush of blood in her ears, but in between the crashes, she heard Erik give a startled exclamation. She curiously lowered her arm just enough to peek over the edge. The sight that greeted her had her dropping it completely.

"Oh my god."

A figure stood in the epicenter of the storm, one arm stretched high, holding something aloft. Glints of silver appeared from nowhere to line both arms while ribbons of red were fabricated from nothingness to form a cape. And when the light began to fade, Jane watched a giant hammer surge forth to slam into the Destroyer once, twice before returning to a Thor that was very much alive, very much a threat, and very much a picture of the God of Thunder.

But as quickly as Thor had been revived, he disappeared, flying into an ever-darkening sky with a whirling hammer and the automaton close behind. Most of their view was obscured, but the occasional flash of light illuminated whatever deadly dance was occurring behind the charcoal clouds.

"Jane… I can't… it's not…" Erik trailed off, mouth gaping open.

"I told you so!" From the corner of her eye, Jane noticed Erik briefly look to an exuberant Darcy who had just run up and was jabbing a finger at the sky. "I told you, Dr. Selvig! I was right about advanced beings on the other side of the bridge!"

A particularly bright flash of light drew their attention back to the scene just as Thor landed in front of them with a thud that could be felt through the ground, the Destroyer falling in a crumpled and ruined heap behind him soon after. It was an impressive finale, no doubt. Marching towards her, cape flowing in the wind, outlined in flames of victory, outfitted in figure-hugging armor that only enhanced the muscles she'd glimpsed in the lab… he couldn't have made it better if he tried.

"So…" Jane swallowed hard and gestured indistinctly. "Is this how you normally look?"

His head canted to one side, a smile playing at his mouth. "More or less."

There was a natural kind of presence to Thor now. It was more than his confident gait and his strength and the general way he carried himself. She couldn't put a name to it. All she knew was that it filled the holes of his being that she hadn't even realized were missing. Although, after seeing the complete picture, she wondered how she ever could've thought he was normal before.
Jane eyed him from head to toe and back again. "It's a good look." And it was almost embarrassing, the level of awe she couldn't quite keep from filtering into the comment.

"We must go to the Bi-Frost site." Thor looked to his friends. "I would have words with my brother."

"Donald." The group turned as one, and Jane tensed at the sight of the agent who had confiscated her research. "I don't think you've been completely honest with me."

It took a moment for her to realize he’d said her ex-boyfriend's name.

It took even longer for her to realize he was actually speaking to Thor.

"Know this, son of Coul: you and I fight for the same cause, the protection of this world. From this day forward, you can count me as your ally. If…" Thor placed a hand on her lower back and guided her closer. "You return the items you have taken from Jane."

Empowered by the impressive figure on her side, Jane crossed her arms. "Stolen."

"Borrowed." The glare directed at the agent wavered. "Of course you can have your equipment back. You're going to need it to continue your research."

To her right, Darcy squeaked and shook Erik, but it was nothing compared to the blaze of excitement that erupted in Jane's chest like a whirlwind. Not only would all her materials and equipment be returned, she would gain the support of people who could probably open doors to new information she didn't even know of. The possibilities were endless, stretched out before her with the bright appeal of answers, and she wanted to fidget in her zest but settled for a beaming grin.

The fingers at her back pressed enough to snag her attention, and she met Thor's eyes. "Would you like to see the bridge we spoke of?"

"Uh…" She was still reeling a bit from the suddenness of everything but caught on quickly at the idea of seeing another Einstein-Rosen bridge. "Sure!"

The trip to the original site went too fast. She needed more time to pick Agent Coulson's brain about the particulars of where she'd be doing her work, more time to persuade Erik to come with her and Darcy because she could use his expertise, more time to simply sit in the cramped backseat of the S.H.I.E.L.D. escort car and feel Thor's fingers trace a repeated path along the back of her hand.

Instead, it felt like only seconds from when Jane piled into the vehicle in the middle of town and when she found herself standing on the outskirts of the rune circle looking alternately between the swirling clouds and Thor.

"I must return to Asgard, but I give you my word… I will return for you." There was a bitter ache in her chest as she studied his gaze. It was captivating, the unadulterated and striking blue. Even when he pressed a kiss to her knuckles, she couldn't look away, but she felt the heat of it all the same, lingering like a brand on her skin. "Deal?"

"Or you could take me with you."

Jane had no idea where the words came from. But once the shock had passed and the scientist in her edged into the forefront, the suggestion didn't seem so bad after all.

"Three days ago I thought you were crazy. Everything you said was strange and impossible and I didn't want to believe any of it could be true even if some things were too connected to be accidental,
"but now…” She shook her head. "Now everything's different. I always knew the bridges were real, but this is my proof, what may be my only chance to actually experience it."

There was also the added opportunity of them getting to know each other better. She didn't quite know which label to stick on what they had, only that it was new and exciting and filled with potential. Though actually voicing that as a reason seemed a bit rushed seeing how they'd known each other for all of three days.

Thor's brows had twitched together at her proposal, but now the furrows eased, smoothed away as he stepped backwards into the runes and pulled her with him. Immediately, Erik strode to the edge of the circle.

"Jane?" Unwilling to go any further, he toed the border. "Don't do this."

"It'll be alright." Untroubled by her friend's frown and bolstered by Darcy's thumbs-up from over his shoulder, Jane offered her most reassuring smile. "I'll be fine."

"He's going back to confront a brother who sent that thing to kill him. You're putting yourself in the middle of matters much bigger than you, things you can't handle." Erik paced back and forth along the curve of runes.

With a slight motion, Thor tugged her closer, releasing her hands so his could settle on her hips. "No harm will come to Jane while she is under my care, Erik Selvig." He glanced up to the growing maelstrom of clouds that signaled the next event. "We shall return."

Thor nodded a farewell, looked up to the sky, and the last thing Jane saw before the bright sands of New Mexico faded into darkness was Erik fall back as the bridge connected with the ground.

Then reality dissolved into something she couldn't have imagined in even her wildest dreams.

Space streamed by, a kaleidoscope combination of colors and galaxies and soundless pressure. The vast emptiness of the cosmos stretched out in every direction, but they were caught in stasis, suspended within the confines of the bridge as it pulled them to its opposite end. It was a weightless sort of feeling, but Thor's hands, firm at her waist and holding her steady, were comforting nonetheless. Still, when she lifted her head and stared into the onrush of stars, she curled her fingers around the plates of Thor's armor.

Moons, planets, worlds.

Entire universes passed by as they travelled from fact to fiction, truth to myth, science to magic.

Between one breath and the next, a solid rainbow materialized beneath her feet. Thor continued to hold her for a minute as the rush bled out of her limbs, leaving her boneless. She took in the glass-like floor filled with lights, the globe engraved with an intricate tree that surrounded them, and finally, a dark-skinned man on a platform who stared at her with burning, golden eyes and dipped his chin in greeting.

"Welcome to Asgard, Jane Foster."

Chapter End Notes

And so we make a hard right to detour off the main storyline from the movie-verse for a
while. Everyone that remembered the prologue probably saw something along these lines coming. There are still some surprises in store, though. Not all is as it seems!

Also, you might have noticed a couple minor changes throughout the chapter. First was the ravens circling overhead while Thor was dying. I added that for no other reason than because I wanted to throw out a reference to Odin. The second was Thor and Jane travelling to the Bi-Frost site via car. In the movie, Thor hammer-flew Jane there, but it bothered me so much that I didn’t know how Sif and the Warriors Three got there. Hr'awkryn had the best comment ever when I explained my reason for the change – “Now that you say that, I am with you. Otherwise what were Jane and Thor doing, loop-de-loops and stuff in the sky while they waited?”

Just for reference – depictions of Yggdrasil show Asgard, Vanaheim, and Alfheim to be in the top tier; Nidavellir, Midgard, Svartalfheim, and Jotunheim in the middle tier; and Niflheim and Muspelheim in the bottom tier. In Jane’s drawing, Midgard is placed in the bottom tier with all the other galaxies extending upward from there.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

Not much to say on this chapter. Enjoy Jane enjoying Asgard... and meeting a familiar face!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-One

“People are not rain or snow or autumn leaves. They do not look beautiful when they fall.”

2011: Asgard

Once, during the months Jane had spent travelling Eastern Europe in an attempt to jog her memories, she'd stumbled across a living history group in Poland. Designed as a tourist attraction, the group had established a small, self-sufficient community that mimicked what life would have been like in the Late Middle Ages.

It was relatively small. However, it had been divided to show the different castes typical of the time period, the details incorporating everything from the building structure to the clothing. Children kept themselves entertained by playing in the cobblestone streets, the women completed their daily chores, and the men managed a variety of positions, everything from laborers to shop owners to ruling officials.

Jane had spent the better part of a day wandering the village in a daze.

The rough fibers of the hand-sewn surcottes, the molten heat and iron-on-iron clang from the blacksmith shop, the roasted meat cooked on a spit, the earthen floors in the homes, the chickens and goats meandering about… all features that had made her feel natural and welcome instead of out of place like the rest of the visitors.

And that didn't even taken into account the draw she'd experienced when fingering the hilt of a short sword outside the smithy or somehow knowing the butter would've tasted better if the cream had been given more time to ferment before being churned or the sudden anticipation she'd felt inside one of the homes, like she expected someone to be standing by the hearth when she turned around, someone she knew.

Arriving in Asgard felt similar to that day in Poland.

Not because she felt strangely at home, but because the second the man on the platform greeted her, a name supplied itself out of nowhere.
"Heimdall."

It tumbled out of its own accord, and the back of Jane's neck prickled under the intensity of the eyes that fell on her all at once. Even if the name wouldn't have been so effective in snagging Thor and his friends' attention, she was confident it was correct. How she knew that, though, she couldn't exactly say.

*The watcher of all the realms, the sentry of the Realm Eternal, an eternal guard that stands at the edge of the Bi-Frost where the Great Sea pours over the edge of the land…*

It was like something heard from underwater, an echo absorbed in that timeless place between sleep and awake. Jane eyed the shadows in the recesses of her mind. The hard lines of Heimdall's armor blurred away, melding with the golden walls and the shining city in the backdrop until she was forced to blink the world back into focus.

*There, he stares out into the Void and sees all. He is constantly monitoring all that transpires and reporting items of interest to the All-Father…*

A chill skittered down her spine despite the heat radiating from Thor's body and the temperate breeze from the opening in the golden dome to her left. Where had she heard those words? They were too peculiar for her to have imagined, too detailed to have been one of Erik's stories. Instead, they coated her tongue with the ashen taste of a memory she couldn't remember.

But why would that be a memory?

Or better yet, how?

Everything, that is, except…

"First the Norns and now Heimdall." Goosebumps pricking across her skin, Jane met Thor's amused gaze with her own baffled one. "For a former skeptic, you are surprisingly well-versed in those of other realms. Erik must have told you a great deal."

"You know, I'm really starting to wonder about that. I didn't bring it up before…" Her fingers slowly unwound themselves from Thor's armor as she stepped out of the circle of his arms. "Actually, I don't bring it up ever if I can help it, but…"

A loud crash drowned out what would've been the first time she'd breached the subject of her lost memories since getting to know Darcy, and Jane turned just in time to see Heimdall collapse, the massive sword he'd been holding clattering down the steps that led to the dais. Thor immediately rushed to the fallen man and kneeled beside him, the rest of the warriors following suit. However, when she took a step towards the group, she suddenly found herself on the floor as well.

Her knees stung from the impact.

So did the heels of her hands.

Jane stared between her splayed fingers to the translucent rainbow beneath her, nausea wending its way through her stomach, and between shallow breaths, she swallowed the acrid bile that had risen in the back of her throat.

"Jane?" Thor's voice echoed loudly around the domed room. Then it was closer, softer, accompanied by a hand resting gently on her upper back. "Jane?"

Already, the trembling that had taken control of her muscles was ebbing. She opted for a silent nod
to reassure Thor she was alright in favor of a verbal reply, though, in case her stomach decided to purge its contents all over the sparkling lights of the bridge.

"Forgive me. I did not think travelling by way of the Bi-Frost would affect you so adversely or I would have warned you beforehand." His thumb traced the curve of her shoulder blade. "The journey is different for every person."

"Thor." At the urgency in Sif's call, Jane lifted her head and sat back onto her heels. "I fear that whatever has happened to Heimdall leads back to Loki. If so, then he is surely aware of the Destroyer and our return."

Jane slowly eased to her feet, testing each movement before making it, and thankfully straightened without any issue. The nausea had lessened with the shakiness. Even still, she was grateful for Thor's steadying hand that remained in place as they approached the others.

"Take him to the healers." The two warriors supporting Heimdall began making their way towards the city, Volstagg and Sif following closely behind. With a grim expression, Thor directed her after them and strode past the group. "Leave my brother to me."

Before he could take more than two steps, though, Jane darted forward and caught the end of his cape. "Wait…"

The giant hammer hung heavy at Thor's side, and he used its weight to prod her back. "Jane, you must go with them." But she just whirled around to push her hands against his chest, trying and failing to make him stop as he continued to walk her backwards.

"But where—"

"The healers will give you something to ease any discomfort you might still feel as well."

"But what about—"

"There is no need to be worried for your safety. You will be escorted by four of the greatest warriors in all the realms. They will protect you until I have dealt with my brother and am able to return for —"

Acting purely on impulse, Jane gripped the edge of his cape with one hand, slipped the other around the back of his neck, and simultaneously pulled him down to her as she rose onto her toes to press her lips to his.

For a moment, the world fell still. The concern for an injured man, the thrill of being in a new realm, the risk of a brother with dark intentions… it all faded away until there was nothing more than her fingernails digging crescent moons into the firm muscle of his neck, his warm exhale across her cheek, her staccato heartbeat. And when he cradled her face in one hand and angled her head to deepen the kiss, she lost even that.

It felt like she was burning, like the heat in her belly, her lungs, her very skin would ignite and use the rest of her body as fuel if she didn't breathe soon. But she couldn't. She was standing on a pyre, but she couldn't waste time breathing when it was far more important to close the infinitesimal space between their bodies and tangle her fingers in his hair and swallow the soft groan in the back of his throat.

When was the last time she'd experienced anything close to this?

It wasn't anything like the weekend she'd stayed with a classmate in grad school – that had turned out
to be a complete and utter disaster – or the night she'd spent with a nameless stranger from a bar in
Stockholm while on vacation with Erik for the holidays – if she could remember more of what
happened between downing the last shot of vodka and waking up in the man's bed the next morning,
she'd probably label it a disaster too.

It wasn't even like the nine and a half months she'd spent dating Donald. There had never been any
problems with physical attraction, and he'd been more than attentive to her in the bedroom. But that
was all there had been between them, the physical. The disparities in what excited them intellectually
had left her wan, wanting.

She was the kind of person who needed common interest to complete the picture, and Thor had that.
He was handsome and strong, willing to protect her, to die for people he'd only known three days,
but he also knew about the bridges, other realms, and science, even if he preferred to call it magic. It
was the combination of all those things that drew her to him like a magnet, stoked the fire in her.

But just when the flames began to lick at the soles of her feet, Thor pulled away to press his forehead
to hers.

Jane could still feel the electric current lingering in the air around them, could taste the thunderstorm
on her tongue even as her heartbeat slowed and the rasp of his stubble faded from her cheek.
Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she inhaled deeply. However, the exhale lodged in her
throat when his thumb swept over her lips.

"If this is how you react when there is nothing to fear, I'm curious as to what would happen if you
were in true peril."

Her eyes flew open, instantly finding his. "What if I'm not worried for myself, though? What if I'm
worried about you?"

"My brother may be a formidable warrior in his own right, but I have faced worse things." There
was a sparkle in the depths of the blue that lessened the grim undertones of what he was about to
face. "Remind me to tell you of the time I fought Thrym's entire kingdom after retrieving Mjölnir to
safeguard Freyja from a coerced marriage."

"Thor!"

The wind dulled Sif's call, but not enough to prevent Jane from catching the tail ends of it. Thor
apparently heard it too, attention shifting over her head to some point down the bridge.
Determination filtered into his expression and set a tense line through his jaw as his hand fell away
and he stepped back.

"You must go." When she hesitated, he looked pointedly over her shoulder. A brief glance revealed
the group to be over halfway to the city. "Now."

"But—"

"Go, Jane."

Thor left no room for question in the command. Even if there was, she wouldn't have contested him
again because, at that moment, the hammer that had been dangling from his left hand began to whirl
in a circle. It increased in speed until it was a blur of iron, giving off such strong winds that she was
forced to increase the distance between them as she shielded her face.

Through the wild tangle of her hair, Jane saw his mouth quirk in a half-smile. "Stay safe." And she
mirrored his grin with a shallow nod.
"You too."

It was like a vacuum opened up. The pressure that had been steadily building in the atmosphere surged forward, sucked inward towards a now crouching Thor and the hammer still revolving at his side. Jane braced herself against its pull as the air was forcibly snagged from her lungs, and holding what little breath remained, she dug in her toes, struggled with the wind at her back, managed one step backward…

Then Thor was gone, disappearing into the twilight sky, and she was spinning on her heel to sprint down the bridge.

"Ah, so this is the prince's human." The group turned as one to look at Jane as she slowed her headlong pace and jogged up behind them. Her lungs were burning from the run, but she did her best to appear just a fraction as graceful as Sif rather than the wild-haired, red-faced, out-of-breath mess that she was. "Not quite what I expected, but not wholly unappealing either. I can see why he favors her."

Nose wrinkling at the backhanded compliment, Jane sought out the new voice. She scanned everyone with the beginnings of a frown on her face, eventually finding a splash of white-blond hair through the narrow gap between Fandral and the sagging Heimdall.

"I'm not Thor's property." Bristling at the archaic insinuation, she crossed her arms. "And I have a name, you know."

The newcomer slipped between Sif and Fandral. "A spitfire, as well. That is a pleasant recompense for the natural shortcomings of mortality."

"Excuse me?"

"Lady Jane…" For being the largest of all the warriors, Volstagg moved quickly. In no time at all, he was beside her, one hand wrapped firmly around her upper arm while the other gestured to the man. "This is Lord Freyr of the Vanir, son of Njörd and ruler of Alfheim." Then closer, leaning in to murmur into her ear. "It's in his nature. He means no disrespect."

Reining in her glower as much as possible, Jane eyed the approaching man. Wavy hair just long enough to brush his shoulders, skin only a few shades darker than the fair strands, clean-shaven face, a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose… Freyr was unlike any of the Asgardians she'd met so far. Where most of them were stocky and muscular, he was long and lean. A swimmer's build more than a warrior's.

Jane glanced at Volstagg. "What do you mean it's in his nature?"

However, before he could answer, Freyr stopped directly in front of her. No more than a couple feet separated them, and Jane had to fight the natural urge to gain some personal space by retreating. Instead, she craned her neck to boldly meet his gaze.

He was tall – just as tall as Thor, if not a bit taller – and sported ice-blue eyes that perfectly matched the cloak thrown over his shoulders and the intricate designs on his armor. A charming grin curled his lips as he perused her form, and Jane was given the distinct impression of someone evaluating a potential conquest.
"Were you not hastening the Gatekeeper to the healers?" With Freyr's attention fully on her, it took a moment for Jane to realize he was speaking to the other Asgardians. "Please..." He trailed the backs of his fingers from her shoulder to her elbow. "Don't let me stop you. I'd be glad to escort the lady myself."

"Um, thanks..." Jane eased out of reach. "But no thanks."

Unworried by her disinterest, Freyr's smile widened. "Are you certain? I would be more than happy to show you the western gardens along the way. They're lovely this time of year."

When Freyr shifted like he was going to take a step forward, Volstagg inserted himself between them, blocking the Vanir's path. "The gardens are out of the way."

He issued a terse nod to Fandral and Hogun who immediately carted Heimdall away, and Sif shadowed them after a lingering, hesitant look. At the armored clatter, Freyr watched them go, ignoring the observation completely. Only after the group had disappeared around a corner did he turn back to a mildly irritated Volstagg.

"Not to mention all of Asgard knows what goes on when you take women there."

"To be the subject of such salacious gossip... my titles must have been well-earned, indeed." The smug wink Freyr shot her way had her shrinking behind the warrior's girth until he was completely blocked from view.

"Go back to your wife, Freyr. Let her warm your bed tonight."

Jane's head shot up so fast her neck cracked. "You're married?" Appalled, she peeked around Volstagg. "And you were still trying to get me to sleep with you?"

A single brow arched elegantly as Freyr's grin dissolved into a crooked smirk. "I merely offered a tour of the gardens." His shoulders lifted in a nonchalant shrug she didn't believe for a second.

"One and the same." Apparently, she wasn't the only one to doubt the Vanir. Volstagg's tone was dripping with disgust, but whether it was directed at the man as a whole or simply his actions, she didn't know.

"Doesn't your wife care?" Against her better judgment, Jane leaned out even more. "That you're sleeping with other women?"

To her surprise, Freyr laughed loudly, head thrown back and a hand pressed to his abdomen. "You are a fascinating thing. I forget that monogamy is considered the norm on Midgard."

"Not only Midgard."

Freyr's gaze hardened at the quip and settled briefly on Volstagg. "Gerðr and I have an arrangement, so to speak, the details of which are lengthy, personal, and somewhat irrelevant at the moment."

When his eyes slid back to hers, though, the cold edge melted away, and Jane found herself stepping from behind Volstagg fully. "Commitment has many definitions. I am a firm believer in to each their own."

As incongruent as Freyr's belief was to her own, the idea behind it was something Jane could respect. It didn't matter that she now had the means to definitively prove her theories were correct. Almost ten years of ridicule had taken its toll. So, in the end, she couldn't fault someone for believing something different or strange. Freyr was right. To each their own.
"But I can see that my proposition has greatly offended you, my lady." Jane blinked to see Freyr had extended his hand. "Please accept my apology. If you do, I swear to never approach you in such a manner nor speak of this again."

Common sense insisted there was some kind of catch hidden between the words. Her gut instinct, on the other hand, was unbelievably quiet, for some reason trusting in his promise. So it was with a halting slowness that she stopped picking at one of her fingernails, reached out, and slid her hand into his.

"Alright…"

Instantly, he rotated her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a chaste kiss to her knuckles. "However, should Thor ever cease to satisfy you or leave you wanting in any way…" He peered at her from beneath his lashes, charming grin once again on his mouth. "You may always call on me."

"That's enough." Volstagg grasped her shoulders, taking control of the conversation just as Jane pulled both an exasperated face and her hand free. "Be gone with you before Thor catches wind of your antics."

"There will be more important things than me to occupy the prince's mind once he locates his brother."

Freyr pivoted to continue watching them as Volstagg steered her down the remainder of the bridge and offhandedly called behind him. "Thor already knows of Loki's deceit."

First, Thor had been banished, and although it hadn't been explicitly stated, it was safe to assume the order had come from his father, the king, before he fell into what Sif had called the Odinsleep. Now, he'd been betrayed by his own brother. Jane's brow furrowed. If that was what families were like in the Realm Eternal, she'd stick with Erik's small, close-knit one in Sweden.

"But is he aware of Loki's newfound acquaintances?"

It took a second for Jane to recognize the sudden halt, and her back arched until she was able to maneuver her way out of the hold. Freed for the moment, she eyed the corner they'd been about to round curiously, but eventually moved to Volstagg's side. However, the warrior didn't even appear to notice, too busy regarding Freyr through narrowed eyes.

"What kind of acquaintances?" His hand fell to the hilt of a double-sided axe. "If you're withholding information that could be detrimental to Thor…"

The open-ended threat fell flat as Freyr arched an unimpressed brow. "Rumors in the halls, nothing more. Whispers that the new king keeps interesting company."

"Freyr…"

"That is all I know, so you should stop fingering that toy unless you plan to make use of it." He looked pointedly at the weapon. "I do not take well to idle threats."

The impasse dragged out, tension sparking in the air between the two men while Jane watched on helplessly. When no end to the standoff presented itself, she rolled her eyes and issued an exaggerated sigh.

Men.

They were all the same, god or not.
"Alright, boys, let's play nice." She elbowed Volstagg's arm. "Shouldn't we be leaving?" The nausea had long since faded, but she wouldn't turn down an opportunity for the healers to remove the glass still embedded in her forearms from the explosion in Puente Antiguo.

For one long, drawn-out moment, they continued to stare at each other, and Jane wondered if the heated discussion would deteriorate into a fight. But then it was over and Volstagg was turning on his heel, hand finding her back as he ushered her around the corner.

"Take care, Lady Jane." Glancing back, she saw Freyr smiling widely, chin dipped in a farewell nod, eyes sparkling with amusement. "I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other in the future."

Before she could even consider responding, the distant glow of the Bi-Frost, the bridge, and Freyr disappeared behind a marble wall. With the Vanir out of sight, Volstagg's hand fell away, and Jane followed him along the curving road, under a massive archway, and into a maze of gilded hallways.

"Well, that was…"

"Indeed." Volstagg agreed with the unfinished thought, gesturing to the left as they reached another junction. "It only gets stranger the longer you know him."

Craning her neck, Jane eyed the halls in wonder. Delicate filigree lined the topmost part of the walls, canvas paintings and intricate sculptures decorated several alcoves, marbled tiles passed beneath her feet, stars shone brightly through the crystal clear glass ceiling high overhead… to call the effect stunning would be a disservice. It deserved more than that, but she lacked a word that could do it justice.

Thoughts wandering back to Thor, she reached out, trailed her fingers along the golden wall. "What do you think Freyr meant about Loki keeping interesting company?"

Volstagg sighed quietly, worry etching lines at the corners of his eyes. "I'm not sure I wish to know."

Fire warmed Jane's back and cast a larger-than-life shadow on the wall in front of her. Other shadows adorned the wall as well, occasionally melding with each other's, melding with hers, as the people to whom they belonged moved around the room. She was studying a ponytailed one that could only be Sif when she heard a faint crunch and looked down to see glittering dust sprinkled over her arms.

Even in the shadow of her body, the specks twinkled unnaturally, miniature stars against the unremarkable tan of her skin. They tingled too. Both forearms prickled with a sensation that – after she'd thought about it for a while – was reminiscent of the one she'd experienced when Thor first arrived in New Mexico. Jane nibbled at her lip, curiosity to explain all things scientific piqued, but an attempt to lift her arm and inspect the powder was stopped by the healer at her side.

"Don't touch it."

Worried that something would happen, Jane obediently put her arm back on the table. But when the healer immediately reached out and began to massage the dust into her forearm, she gave the woman a keen look. "I thought you said don't touch it." The sarcasm laced through her tone was clear.

The healer continued to work, moving down to the back of Jane's hand, all the while avoiding her
eyes. "I meant for you not to touch it."

A glance over her shoulder revealed Fandral to be massaging the same glittering powder onto a gash on Heimdall's side while Hogun did the same to a series of scrapes on Sif's leg. "They're touching it."

"They are also Æsir."

"So that's why you don't want me to mess with it?" Jane frowned at the healer's downturned head. "Because I'm not one of you?"

"No…" The woman released one arm and promptly grabbed the next. "Because you are human."

"Which means I'm not one of you."

For the first time since Jane had walked into the room, the healer met her eyes. There was a hard edge to the blue-grey, like cold steel, like flint, and she couldn't help but wonder if the tightness in their voices would spark against it.

"You do not belong here." They were simple words, but they cut through Jane like a knife. Her entire professional career had been accompanied by one jeering comment after another. She hadn't belonged there, she didn't belong here… where was home when she didn't belong anywhere? "The only reason you are is because you have garnered the prince's special attention. If the All-Father was well, he would—"

The healer stopped abruptly, mouth snapping closed with an audible click as she resumed her work. But Jane wasn't ready to let it go yet. She yanked her arm away and met the woman's surprised look with her own boldly challenging one.

"He would what?"

"The All-Father…" A myriad of emotions crossed the healer's face, surprise to defiance to resentment, and finally, to a vacant sort of passivity. "I shouldn't say such things to an honored guest."

Obviously, that line of questioning was going to be a dead end and no further explanation given, so Jane allowed her arm to be pulled back to the table with an inelegant snort. Most of Thor's friends had been friendly at first meeting. So had Freyr. But if Sif's sidelong glances and this healer's reaction were anything to go by, the rest of Asgard might not be as welcoming.

Half-lost in her thoughts, Jane watched as the pinpricks of embedded glass literally disappeared from her arms. Healing stones, that was what Fandral had called the diamond-shaped objects. He'd also said their restorative properties were a result of magic. She couldn't deny that the stones did their job well, but to call it magic… well, she was predictably skeptical at that.

The healer rubbed in the last of the powder and sat back. "How does it feel?"

"Perfect." Better than perfect, if she were being honest. Lifting an arm, she gauged the flawless skin critically before glancing up. "Thank you."

A tight-lipped nod was the woman's only response. She gathered up the healing stones still laid out on the tabletop and carefully slipped them into a small, drawstring bag. Then she was gone in a swirl of ivory and lavender silk, crossing the room to tend to the other warriors with a much more pleasant expression.
Alone on her side of the room, Jane absentmindedly rubbed a newly-healed arm, stood, and made her way to one of the windows lining the wall. A cool breeze shifted the curtains into her face, but she neatly swept them aside to lean against the marble.

Asgard was quiet. Unnaturally quiet given the familial drama taking place somewhere in the palace. Flickering light shone from the dwellings, but the streets were dark, highlighted only by the twin moons that hung high in the sky. Everyone, it seemed, was blissfully unaware of what was happening between the two princes.

If only she felt the same.

An anxious energy was creeping its way through her bones. It lurked beneath the surface, not quite strong enough to force her into doing something irrational but just strong enough to make her fidget, drum her fingers against one elbow. A bead of sweat slid between her shoulder blades, and she shivered with something that had nothing to do with the cooler air against her heated skin.

Loki had sent the automaton with the intent to kill. That wasn't something Thor could simply ignore. Even if he could, Jane doubted his brother would be willing to set aside whatever had brought them to this point. There was clearly more going on than Thor had told her. That was, if he was even aware.

Without warning, the relative peace of Asgard was broken by a crash that echoed through the still air and shuddered the wall beneath her shoulder.

Jane straightened in response while the muted conversation in the background cut off mid-sentence. But before she could voice the question on her tongue, gold stones cascaded past the open window, quickly followed by a tumbling heap of blonde hair, silver armor, and red cape.

Was that…?

Yelling sounded from the hallway, muffled through the thick doors, but the four warriors were already on their feet. One hand braced against the door and weapon already drawn, Volstagg urged her to remain where she was. There was no need, though. She had no intention of joining their potential battle.

Holding tightly to one side of the window, Jane leaned out in time to see the figure connect with the ground. The horses that had been standing idly nearby reared in surprise and trotted nervously around the area. For one heart-stopping second, she thought he was dead. Then he stirred, slowly rising from the impression.

He'd only just picked up the fallen hammer when all hell broke loose.

A bright light split the sky at the same time the door to the healer's chamber slammed open with a bang, and Jane spun around at the battle cry. Two large creatures loomed in the doorway, twice as large as the warriors and midnight blue in color. One raised a weapon that glinted in the hall to stave off a blow from Hogun, and its mouth split in a chilling grin before engaging the rest of the Asgardians.

An eerie mist slunk across the floor from the creatures. Jane watched it warily, but before it could come too close, she crawled onto the window ledge and carefully turned. Squinting against the white blaze in the distance, she braced her back against the marbled frame and peered over the edge.

"Thor!"

The God of Thunder looked left, right, and then up to where she was crouched in the window. His
lips briefly quirked, spotting her. "You are well, Jane?"

One of the warriors growled out a curse behind her. "Yes, but—"

"Then you must stay there until I return."

The increased atmospheric pressure associated with his takeoff yanked the retort from her throat and threw it into nothingness, unheard, and Jane could only watch as he arced high into the sky before angling out towards the epicenter of the light that could only be the Bi-Frost.

Weapons clashed in a piercing scream that sounded too close for comfort. Steel scraped with ice, curses jarred with growls, and Jane turned to see the healer scrambling across settees and around the fire pit to get away from the mêlée that was drawing steadily closer. Even with the battle staged four-to-two, it was impossible to tell who was winning. Cobalt blood dripped from numerous wounds on the creatures, but a weaponless Volstagg clutched an arm that dangled limply at his side while Hogun heavily favored his right leg.

The conflict drew closer still, shards of marble flying her way when Fandral's deflected strike connected with the wall instead. If she ran now, she might still be able to make it, but the mist that covered the floor was creating ice crystals on everything it touched and she was hesitant to step down into it. With only one way out, Jane set her jaw in determination.

Stay there until Thor returned…

"Like hell, I will."

And so it was with adrenaline-fueled motions and a heart jumping into her throat with every beat and that anxious feeling breathing life into her that she grasped the vine-tangled latticework outside the window and swung onto it.

Jane moved with practiced ease despite never having climbed a trellis before – that she remembered, at least – and in only a few minutes, she found herself safely on the ground, tripping through the shattered stones courtesy of Thor's fall, and grasping one of the stray horse's bridles. Still frightened by the commotion, it shied away from her, but some unknown instinct automatically kicked in, had her whispering nonsensical words and stroking its muzzle until it calmed down enough for her to swing into the saddle.

"Jane!" Fandral's head appeared in the window, looking wildly around until he spotted her astride the horse. "Come back, Lady Jane! It isn't safe!"

But she was already gone, wheeling the horse around, digging her heels into its flanks, and holding tightly to the reins as the animal surged forward.

Asgard was a blur of unknown streets and shocked faces as people were drawn out of their homes by the uproar. Jane didn't even spare them a glance, though. Her sights were set on the Bi-Frost still glowing brightly in the midnight sky, an ever-present guide even when she couldn't see it around the buildings. She rode with a single-mindedness that didn't allow room for thought. No ruminating on what the people would think of her or if her actions would negatively affect Thor in their eyes; no musing on how she knew the best way to calm the horse, much less when she'd learned to ride one so skillfully.

The flagstones had just given way to translucent rainbow when a tremor rippled through the bridge. Jane instinctively sat back, and the horse slowed in response. However, when the bridge quaked again, a sick feeling knotted in the pit of her stomach and she leaned forward onto the horse's neck,
stroking its sweat-lathered fur, urging it back to a gallop.

Concentration broken, worries began to flood through the cracks.

For all she knew, Thor was alone down there. Then again, it was possible he'd gotten pulled into a fight with the brother who had started all of this or some other foe that had been lying in wait. If that was the case... Thor had said he'd faced worse things, but what if he'd been mistaken? And the more she thought about it, the more what if's there were.

What if he was outmatched?

What if he was losing?

What if he was injured?

What if he was dead?

Jane fiercely shook the thoughts from her head. Until she got there, it was impossible to know what was going on. She'd drive herself crazy flipping through all the possibilities. The only thing she knew with complete certainty was that, whatever was happening that was shaking the bridge in regular intervals, it couldn't be good.

The longer she rode, the more the endless expanse of stars opened up, separating first to reveal the golden dome of the Bi-Frost, then the origin point of the light currently rending the sky, and finally two figures that were like shadows against the brightness. Thor wasn't alone – Jane squinted unwaveringly through the horse's mane until she saw movement – but at least he was alive.

Relief flooded through her.

But that relief turned to ice in her veins when the end of the bridge exploded in a firework display of crystal, light, and sound.

The force of the blast knocked her sideways, unseating her from the horse. Something popped in her shoulder when she connected with the bridge and the coppery taste of blood filled her mouth, but it was the loss of air that made her panic, all her breath having been expelled in one, painful rush on impact. She rolled several times before throwing one leg out to stop her momentum. And even though it couldn't have been more than a couple seconds, it felt like hours before her lungs filled with oxygen, the world gradually ceased its dizzying spin, and everything settled into one constant flow to the left.

To the... left?

Jane blinked. Then she blinked again. Only after the third did she realize she was lying flat on her stomach, head hanging off the side of the bridge and hands curling around its edge as she watched the water flow by beneath her.

A shiver worked its way through her at the recognition of just how close she'd come to falling over the brink. But before she could scoot back to safer ground, the light sliced a blinding path through the sky and she turned just in time to see the Bi-Frost disappear beneath the waterline along with several feet of the actual bridge.

It was the clatter of hooves that finally brought her back to the present.

Startled, the horse whinnied nervously and skittered around the area. Its eyes rolled wildly as it moved from one side of the bridge to the other, and every time it threw its head, the jangling tackle
only seemed to frighten it further. When it came dangerously close to trampling her on one pass, Jane scurried to her feet and half-ran, half-stumbled out of the way.

With the overwhelming, generator-like hum of the Bi-Frost gone, a new noise filled the air. Shouting, clanging, a cruel-edged laugh... all things that should have sent her in the opposite direction like the horse galloping back towards the city but instead drew her forward. And she was so intent on the fight before her that she didn't notice the debris littering the bridge until it was too late.

Between one stride and the next, Jane tripped and was sent sprawling. She felt a razor-sharp piece of crystal slice open her palm, watched the blood well from between her fingers, looked down to what could only be some kind of horned helmet tangled around her ankles. Then she heard a strangled yell.

Thor was on his knees in front of another man, hammer held high, teeth clenched with the effort of fending off the downward stroke of a scepter while sparks rained down around him...

And Jane was sprinting forward, muscles sore and body aching and lungs burning, leaving bloody handprints on the bridge and the burnished helmet as she tossed it aside...

And the glow lessened just enough for her to see the weapons split apart from their stalemate, just enough for her to see Thor's hammer fall to the bridge beside him in defeat, just enough for her to reach forward and grab the man as he reared back to issue a final blow...

"No!"

Hands wrapping around his bicep, Jane pulled with every ounce of strength she had left. She threw her entire weight into the movement only to come up short. Everything she had wasn't enough to even budge him. It only made him growl out a curse and turn on her.

Grey-green met honeyed-brown, and she knew she was going to die, knew it with every fiber of her being, could see it in the livid depths of his eyes. But then the snarl melted from his face. Rage was replaced with stunned disbelief, and his eyes flicked back and forth between hers for one timeless moment before...

"Jane?"

Chapter End Notes

General fact for this chapter – Freyr, twin brother to the goddess Freyja, is considered to be the god of virility, prosperity, and fair weather. He was given Alfheim as a teething present, and although it isn’t explicitly stated that he rules that realm, that’s what we’re going with here. According to mythology, he rides a giant boar named Gullinbursti, possesses a ship that always has a favorable breeze and can be folded down to be carried in a pouch when not in use, and once wielded a magic sword that he eventually bargained in order to wed the jötun Gerðr.

Also, I’m operating under the assumption that Loki couldn’t actually see what was happening through the eyes of the Destroyer while it was in Puente Antiguo. Let’s just go with the idea that he could only hear what was happening.
Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Interlude: Loki

Chapter Notes

A good majority of you have been clamoring for this since the first arc, so I’m excited to finally present the highly anticipated chapter from Loki’s perspective! This was never intended when I was planning out the story and is, therefore, a direct result of all your repeated requests.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Two

“It’s funny the way the world turns and the fates fall.”

1021: Muspelheim

Blood spattered the front of Loki’s armor, slid a languid trail down the vambraces covering the inside of his arm before easing onto his palm and dripping from the tips of his fingers. Steam rose in a haze from the spray on his armor, mixing with the pervasive fog of the realm. It smelled of sulfur. Sulfur and iron and death.

He looked down to the blackened skin left in the liquid’s wake.

Nothing burned like the blood of a jötun.

With a mildly disgusted expression, he flicked the opposite hand. The tacky wetness instantly disappeared, leaving his armor clean and his skin unblemished. Stepping over the lifeless form on the ground, he spared a single glance for his handiwork: a gaping hole in the fire giant’s chest. It was messier than his usual methods, but that had been the point. Every deviation helped throw the scent off his trail.

Loki stepped through the stone archway and into the antechamber. Magma bubbled in place of a floor, except for the narrow walkway leading to a pedestal in the center of the room. It was all very predictable. Anticlimactic, even. He’d always believed the details included in children’s tales were more for dramatic effect than based on actual truth. Clearly, that wasn’t the case. The jötnar would be better served by utilizing additional safeguards and fewer theatrics.

There were no hidden traps, just the long, uneventful walk to the dais. Taking in what would be the reward of his journey was equally uneventful. Small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, the item rested inconspicuously in a shallow basin atop the pedestal, altogether unassuming and dull. That was part of its nature, though. On its own, the item appeared wholly unremarkable. In someone's possession – Loki picked it up and watched color flare across its surface, swirling tumultuously like a set of miniature storm clouds – it was infinitely more.
Created to echo the most inward desires of its bearer, it acted like a mirror. But where a mirror only reflected, the item also granted, and that was what made it so inherently dangerous. Few people understood their basest desires. Fewer still had the strength to ward off a carefully-planted suggestion, which was exactly what the item did. Corrupt a purpose, twist an idea, make the user believe the thought was their own... it would subtly pull them towards something darker than intended.

Loki spun the item in his hand. Power was a pulse beneath his fingertips, a steady thrum that called out to the seiðr flowing in his veins. It whispered dark, seductive promises in his ear, and as he closed his eyes to listen, he felt the measured slither of a predator through his chest, felt claws begin to burrow their way into his organs.

"You play with things beyond your control, Asgardian."

With some effort, Loki opened his eyes, took a deep, steadying breath against the item's sinister encouragement, and vanished it to one of his secret places in the space between the realms. No longer under its influence, he was able to turn and face the group of jötun lurking at the entrance.

One that stood a couple steps in front of the rest grinned wickedly, canines stained red by the glow of magma illuminating the chamber. "I knew I smelled an Æsir."

"A breath of fresh air in this waste of a realm, I'm sure."

Another snarled low in his throat at Loki's sardonic insult, the fire that was his eyes flaring slightly as he took a step forward. However, the giant in the forefront cut off the impulsive attack with a snap of his teeth and a growl. The would-be attacker stepped back immediately, if not a little reluctantly.

"I know this thief..." The grin angled into a sneer. "The bastard second spawn of the All-Father, he is. The Lie-Smith."

Loki raised a single brow at the moniker. "Is that what they're calling me now?" Untroubled, he brushed nonexistent dust from the front of his armor. "Fascinating." His tone implied it was anything but.

"Return that which you have taken, Asgardian, and you may leave with your life."

"And if I choose not to?" Despite his flippant exterior, there was a very clear warning beneath the words, but the primary jötun continued to grin.

"Then you can watch it paint the stones when I rip out your throat."

"Your threats are wasted. I am not some child to be intimidated." Loki shifted subtly, hands flexing while his casual stance widened into one more battle-ready. "However, if you insist on carrying it out, you are welcome to try."

The scrape of claw on stone resonated in the chamber when the giant slid one foot forward. "You would willingly bring upon yourself the wrath of Surtur?"

"Your master has grown idle in these times of peace, lazy and inattentive in his thousand-year slumber, and he will suffer for it." Cool leather pressed against his palm, the hilt of one of his daggers conjured from air. "I imagine he will be very displeased, indeed, when he wakes to find his prized trophy gone."

A rumbling growl was the only indicator of the coming attack. Before Loki could blink, the jötun were upon him, streams of fire hardening into glowing swords while three sets of razored claws
sought his throat.

The numbers were stacked three-to-one, but numbers equated neither odds nor skill. A jötun higher in Surtur's ranks would be a more adequate match. Not those he faced, though. Two were messy and clumsy, too excited at the thought of bloodshed to do anything more than attack blindly. The third was slightly more reserved but still grossly outmatched.

Loki weaved among them in a deadly dance and buried his daggers hilt-deep at every opportunity. Enraged roars were his reward, the flow of scalding blood his prize, and it was only moments before the sons of Muspel joined their earlier comrade in death. But there were sounds in the distance, and dust rained on his head as the stones trembled with approaching giants, alerted by the struggles of their kin.

Bravery was one thing.

Wisdom was another.

And there was rarely enough room in a single being to harbor both to full degree.

Thor was brave to a fault, gallant, fearlessness incarnate and the epitome of valor. He lived and breathed for heroics. Loki did not. It was in the shadows that he thrived, away from the light and pomp and absurdity that accompanied recognition. After all, there was little room for wisdom when all of Asgard desired nothing more than a show.

So, embracing the wisdom that defined him and tossing aside the card of bravery he'd never truly held, Loki withdrew from Muspelheim.

Worlds passed in a blur. Muspelheim to Alfheim to Niðavellir to Svartalfheim… he stepped quickly from one realm to another, leaving a trail so complex and winding it was sure to prevent the jötnar from following until, eventually, the amalgamation of landscapes separated into Midgard. It wasn't a Midgard with which he was familiar, though.

Smoke tarnished the sky a murky grey, buildings groaned and popped under the pressure of a raging fire, and the ground was littered with the remains of mortals. It had been several decades since he'd last been to Midgard, but this place… this desolate background of ruin, fire, and death was not what he remembered.

Loki pulled in one foot from where it had been unintentionally toeing a loop of glistening intestines and stared dispassionately at the man laid out before him. Limbs were askew, eyes glazed over. The victim reeked of blood and entrails and filth. Mortality had a stench all its own, and Loki's lip curled at the pungent taste of it that settled on his tongue.

It was the awareness of another living being that finally drew his attention. Alone in the remnants of the battlefield, the woman eyed him suspiciously. Her muscles were tense and knuckles white around the hilt of her sword, ever at the ready even though it was lowered at her side.

"Are you death?"

"That depends." It would not be the first time someone had called him such, although that usually came when the keen edge of his knife was pressed to an opponent's throat.

The woman tilted her head, the wind catching her hair as it caught his cape, and the faint scent of nature reached him above the smoke and decay. "On?"

"Death is so final. So… real." Loki glanced at the bodies that surrounded them. Neither race nor
realm of origin mattered. Everyone looked the same in death. It had a way of erasing the details. Turning back, he watched her take in the same sight with a vacant expression. "Do you fear death, mortal?"

"No."

Instantaneous and bold, the answer had him narrowing his eyes and stepping forward, intrigued. "Why not?" He could count on one hand the number of times he’d been genuinely surprised, and none had ever been caused by a mortal.

"Because…” The woman sucked in a sharp breath, then fell silent.

"That is not a reason."

For the second time, she focused on one of the maimed bodies, and Loki had to bite back the long-suffering sigh that threatened to make itself known as the moment stretched out. Mortals never had been the best conversationalists. They often spurted replies, whatever came to mind first. The few times they didn’t, they dwelled on an answer for so long he could almost see time eat away their existence. It was just one of many reasons he avoided Midgard. Once the novelty of being received and feared as a god had worn off, he'd found little reason to suffer the mortals' antics.

"Because death is simple." A furrow generated by deep meditation creased the woman's forehead as her tongue darted out to wet chapped lips. "It's life that is difficult."

Loki felt a half-smile lift one corner of his mouth. It was a far cry from the answer he'd suspected, but that only made it doubly intriguing. Most mortals feared death. They ran from it in frantic attempts to escape its dark clutches, and when all attempts failed, they filled their pitifully short lifespans with things that made them feel worthwhile, important. Pathetic, all of them.

So what made the woman before him different?

The seams of Yggdrasil shuddered with movement. The witnesses were all dead, but other jötnar would make the connection. After all, his methods of fighting were not without reputation. Eventually, the theft would be tied back to him. Then they would stalk him, hunt him. But they would also hunt the item.

His death would only be recompense.

Retrieving the item was the objective.

Loki regarded the woman thoughtfully. It would be a risk, concealing the item with her. She would remain unaware, of course, but there was always the potential of a jötun crossing her path and realizing what it was she unknowingly held. There was also the problem of the item itself. He had heard its call, could still feel its draw in the empty spaces between his bones. However, the item only responded to actions and thoughts done with cognizance, so her ignorance would be her safeguard. In theory, at least.

Obviously, he would have to ensure her immortality. It wouldn’t do to transfer the item from one mortal to another over time. Additionally, he’d have to visit on a semi-regular basis to verify the item remained safe and hidden. But while that would have proven to be an issue in the past, Loki found himself surprisingly untroubled by the idea now.

Midgard, it seemed, had just become significantly more interesting.
The mob reminded Loki strongly of wolves. Single-minded in their thirst for blood, the people clamored for death and retribution and, by extension, salvation, as if sacrificing a few would protect the majority. But it was a disease beyond their comprehension. The offerings were futile because the sickness could not be appeased. It would spread like wildfire until it burned itself out, and there was nothing the mortals could do but die.

The pyres were systematically lit, but the screams from the platform only served to heighten the bloodlust, the crowd surging forward as one. Heedless of those around them, Jane was clutching at his shirtfront. She begged him to act, to interfere, to do something, but he countered every plea, all the while watching the flames creep higher and transform the air above it into a haze of heat that distorted the victims' terrified features.

Seeing the truth in his explanation, Jane finally fell silent.

Then she fell away altogether.

It wasn't so much her panicked grasp at his tunic that pulled his attention from the scene as her pained yelp. The sound cut through the rioting like a knife despite it being significantly quieter, and Loki looked down to see her sprawled on the ground, a man crouched above her with one hand fisted in her hair and the other gesturing angrily.

Someone bumped into him and, when he didn't move, shoved past in a bid to get closer to the front of the mob. The stench of charred flesh filled the air. Enraptured by the burning spectacle still occurring, no one even seemed to notice their immediate surroundings, didn't hear the man's growled threat, didn't see the petite immortal spit defiantly in her attacker's face.

No one, that was, except Loki.

One moment the man was chuckling darkly above Jane who continued to glare daggers. The next, he was laid out – half on top of her, half beside her – unconscious, a bruise already blooming at his temple.

Without knowing exactly why, Loki relished the grind of his clenched teeth, the rawness on his knuckles from the force of the blow, and the anger that roared in his ears like thunder. It was a primal sort of reaction, instinctive. But there wasn't time to contemplate the issue, not once he caught sight of Jane's stunned expression.

He didn't lose control.

He prided himself on control.

And yet, he'd lost control.

The weathered, calloused hands of Jane's travelling friend had reverted to his own. So had the rest of his body, if the loss of curling locks against his forehead and neck was any indication. Loki gazed at the hands protruding from the atrocious Midgardian outfit, utterly perplexed. Not since the early years of his instruction had he faltered in maintaining another person's visage. So why now? He focused on Jane and the man now helping her up. What had compelled him to intervene when he'd convinced himself against ever doing so, much less allow the image to fade?
Loki tucked away the issue to examine at length later, schooling his features into a carefully blank expression. "If you wish to leave, I suggest you do so now."

The man whose appearance he'd assumed continued to examine Jane for any further injuries. Jane, however, stared at Loki fixedly. A question played in the depths of her eyes, but they both knew she wouldn't voice it, didn't dare with her companion so close. Instead, she settled on a neutral, if not slightly dazed, thank you.

Then they were gone.

No one paid the retreating pair any mind, just shifted to fill the empty space left in their wake. Normally, Loki would have made his own escape at that point rather than suffer the mortals anymore. He'd already stayed longer than he would any other time. But as people jostled him and yelled obscenities, he found himself motionless aside from turning to follow Jane's progress, her eyes meeting his once more in a backward glance before she was led from the city.

Loki blinked back to awareness, the moment broken. Then, feeling the figure at his feet move, he crouched down, grabbed hold of the wakening man, and pulled him through one of Yggdrasil's seams before he could question his own motives.

Buildings melted into trees, cobblestones into lichen-covered rocks, screams into crashing waves, and the only fire in sight was that of the sky, set aflame by the sun dipping beneath the horizon. Still battling the aftereffects of unconsciousness, the man was slow to realize the shift in the surroundings. When Loki grasped him by the throat and dangled him over the edge of the cliff, though, he was much quicker to respond.

"Please." The gurgled entreaty was accompanied by desperately clawing fingers and wildly kicking feet, tendons jutting out like ropes as he struggled. "My wife… my… children…"

"Will either learn to survive or join you in death."

Going impossibly still, the man took in Loki's customary Asgardian garb for the first time with wide eyes. "Who are you?" His fingers twitched briefly, throat working in a hard swallow around the steadfast hold.

But Loki merely smiled – tight-lipped with a harsh curl at the corners; equal parts solemnly grim and cruelly mischievous – and released the man. He was back in his chambers in the Realm Eternal before the mortal had even connected with the rocks jutting through the surf below.

1698: Caribbean

"What can ah be helping ye with, sir?"

Loki's focus lingered on the commotion occurring in the tavern before drifting to the grizzled, bearded, gap-toothed man who stood behind what barely constituted a counter. A young boy stood beside the man, wearing tattered clothes and staring dolefully up at Loki who managed not to grimace when the boy snuffled loudly and drew the back of his hand beneath his nose.

"We've plenty of drink to warm yer belly, if that's what yer after." The man motioned through the wide doorway to the tavern. "Or there're rooms upstairs for the night." Raising his eyebrows
s suggestively, the man's mouth spread into a snagletooth grin. "We also rent 'em by the hour if there's a lass ye've had yer eye on."

"Actually, I'm looking for someone. A hand at the docks said I could find him here." Technically, the ship's sentry had shrieked it when Loki threatened his life, but that was neither here nor there. "A captain. Goes by the name of George Booth."

"Aye, well..." The man eyed the expensive – relatively speaking, of course – Midgardian attire Loki had donned. "He might be here."

The meaning was clear. Money spoke the same language, no matter the realm, so Loki conjured several gold coins beneath the counter and tossed them onto the worn surface. The boy's eyes went wide, but the man snatched up the coins as if they were about to disappear. Loki didn't mention that they would, indeed, vanish just as soon as he did.

Clearly pleased, the man nudged the boy. "Lad."

Immediately, the boy hopped over the counter, leaving a skid of mud from his boots across the top. He landed before Loki and sniffed again, then jerked his head towards the tavern. "Come wit' me, mister."

Pirates filled the room. Drinking, laughing, swearing... they alternated between yelling for more ale and yelling at each other, and when neither was being done, they were grabbing for one of the women circling the room. Following the boy through the throng, Loki half-watched a woman squeal in mock protest of the hand groping beneath her skirts before giving in and straddling the man.

"That'd be him, mister." Loki looked away from the copulating pair to a man at a far table. "Right there."

George Booth was remarkably unremarkable. Dull, brown hair fell in matted tangles around his face, an array of rings adorned his fingers, and his clothing was shabby and ill-kept. The captain lifted his tankard in a toast, downed the contents, and slammed it back to the table with an uproarious laugh. If not for the keen edge to his eyes that suggested awareness even when acting the fool, Loki would've thought him the wrong man.

"Off with you, then, boy." Loki flicked another gold coin to the boy who straightened momentarily with pride before winding back through the crowd.

Both of the benches lining the table were full, but the wait for an opening wasn't long. After only a couple minutes, one of the men stood, grabbed the rest of the group's tankards, and made his way towards the bar, leaving Loki to eye the vacant seat.

An image of Jane – eyes sparking and cheeks flushed with anger; fragile bones of her wrists grating against each other beneath his hands – welled up unbidden. She had claimed to understand the repercussions of her decision, knew that playing whore to Captain Kidd was choosing the lesser of two evils.

Perhaps she was right.

But that didn't make it right.

Jane had also said the line between what was right and wrong was often blurred. Likely, she hadn't meant for it to cover him disemboweling people in a torturously slow manner, but considering the captain before him was the one who had forced her into making the unsavory arrangement to begin with, Loki assumed she'd make an exception.
So it was with a predatory smile that he slid into the seat opposite George Booth.

1812: Russia

She was dying.

With the jötun's lifeblood still scalding his hands, Loki knelt on one knee beside the unrecognizable form that was Jane Foster.

Her flesh was red… the vivid red of a fatal burn interspersed with oozing pustules and sections that had been charred black. The last traces of liquid seeped from the yawning holes where her eyes had been, trailing down the mangled cheeks, occasionally dipping into valleys where the skin had completely melted away to reveal the sinew and bone beneath. Her chest rose and fell in shallow, halting breaths. It was the only sign she was still alive.

The jötun's leg moved in his peripheral vision, and Loki glanced towards the giant still twitching in a death its body had not yet accepted. There was no hope for a recovery, though. Even if his daggers were to have failed, the spear he'd driven through the giant's skull would not.

The jötun would surely die.

As would Jane.

Unless…

Loki outstretched one hand. Without touching, he hovered above the scorched femur showing clearly through the remaining meat of the upper thigh, the hairsbreadth of membrane keeping the internal organs in place, the mottled décolletage, and finally, the face that was barely a face. Then he snatched back his hand with a scowl.

Unless what?

Unless shouldn't even be an issue.

He should withdraw from the scene, leave Jane to die in her relative obliviousness in the midst of a crumbling city like the mortal she was. But then, she wasn't entirely mortal. She was immortal – human, but immortal – and it was, at least in part, his own doing. Not that it made her end fate his responsibility, but…

In a way it did.

And something swelled in his chest as he took in the slash of a mouth that would never grin or smirk or laugh again, something that insisted unless, something that compelled him to lay a hand on the blistered forehead and watch his magic knit together muscle, reform skin, and supply the features he knew by heart.

Clothing wove together to cover her form, but Loki couldn't tear his gaze away from her slack mouth. He watched her lips dry with the constant breaths, felt the cool inhales and warm exhales like a steady rhythm against his wrist, and the iron bands he hadn't even realized were tight around his chest eased.
Why?

Why had he drawn her back from the inky darkness, from death's sweet call, from the resplendent halls of Valhalla to which she would undoubtedly have gone?

It was a question he couldn't answer.

Loki touched a fingertip lightly to the scar on Jane's jaw, the lone mark that persisted from the ordeal, and heard her sigh softly in response, eyes relaxing into a quasi-peaceful slumber and lips curling into a barely-there smile.

Or perhaps…

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1927: Asgard

For the sixth time, Loki spun on his heel and paced the length of his chambers. Cool tile was momentarily interrupted by an exotic rug, and he side-stepped the furniture situated atop it without thinking. Only once he'd reached the opposite end did he pause. Then he slammed a fist into the marbled wall.

Shards clinked against the floor, interspersed with the occasional dash of red, and Loki unconcernedly took in the crimson and white artwork of cuts across his knuckles. The injury would heal within hours. By the time he went to the meetings scheduled the following morning, there wouldn't even be a mark.

His thoughts, however, were a different matter.

Bracing a forearm against the wall, Loki leaned into it and rested his head on the supple leather of his surcoat. In the limited space, there was only the expanse of wall that eventually met with the tile floor, the mess of marble and blood that littered the ground, and his boots. But all he could see was Jane.

The impish curl of her lips, the slow saunter, the bold challenge… she'd worn his helmet like a god damn crown, and he'd wanted nothing more than to pin her into the corner between the bookshelf and the wall, drag his hands over every inch of the robe, and taste the alluring combination of smugness and trepidation she'd sported so well.

At first, he'd been content to grasp the curved horns and force her head back. Just a show of power to remind her who he really was. Then he'd seen the desire in her eyes, the fluttering pulse, the creamy length of her neck, the tantalizing outline of her breasts through the robe that arched towards his chest…

Loki shoved away from the wall with a vicious growl.

Energy flooded his body like a current at the memory, and standing alone in his chambers, he trembled beneath the weight of his frustration, his confusion, his want. Because he had wanted her. He'd wanted her. It went against every ideal he'd ever maintained, but there was no denying it. And even more was the deep-seated knowledge that he wasn't satisfied with a simple kiss.

He wanted to do more than pin her into a corner, trace the outline of her body, and claim her mouth
as his. He wanted to feel the nails that had scratched at his nape scrape furrows down his back, wanted to know the sensation of her bare skin against his, wanted to hear her cry out his name as he claimed her completely.

Loki buried his fingers in his hair and clenched his eyes shut.

He wanted a human.

He wanted Jane.

1962: Ceylon

A chamber maid. That was the first woman Loki bedded. It had been in the aftermath of his first noteworthy battle outside Asgard’s training grounds, when the adrenaline was still coursing strongly through his veins and he was very well drunk with the feeling of victory. Thinking him still dispatched to Vanaheim, she’d come into his chambers to perform her duties only to find him half-stripped of his armor, body humming with exhilaration and needing release.

He’d taken her against the wall.

Not a very romantic encounter, nor tremendously memorable compared to the women he’d slept with in the future, but she’d served him well enough at the time, meeting his advances with an eagerness that later made him question whether or not him shoving her against the stones, hiking up her skirts, and pausing only long enough to pull himself free of his pants before sheathing himself within her had been her plan all along.

He hadn't known her name – honestly, he hadn't cared to – and he could no longer remember what she'd even looked like. The only detail he could recall with clarity was the coppery scent of Vanir blood that had permeated the room throughout their encounter, courtesy of the still-damp stains on his clothing.

Freyja had been significantly more remarkable. Wearing a crooked smirk and a dress that left little to the imagination, she'd hooked a finger over his collar, drawn him into a curtained alcove, and shown him the reason mortals referred to her as the goddess of beauty and fertility. And like most men she set her sights on, he'd followed without complaint.

The chaise lounge concealed in the alcove had either been a convenient happenstance or a product of prior planning. Either way, he hadn't questioned it, too intent on the wild-haired, freckle-adorned, wisp of a woman beneath him. The reward had been worth the risk, though. It had given him an undeniable thrill, driving her into the velvet floral pattern while her oblivious husband and father talked politics just beyond the curtain.

But this time…

This time there was no smell of blood or high from battle, no bold attempts at seduction from an adulterous vixen, no lies or deceit. There was only Jane – soft, delicate, human Jane – and the delightful way she responded to him and his touch.

The women of Asgard were always all too eager to share a prince's bed, whether it be Thor's or his, and Loki had never been one to deny their attentions, their beckoning eyes. They served him well,
sating his desires with skills garnered by centuries in the profession. It was mutually beneficial to all parties. She would receive bragging rights, and he release. A simple arrangement with no strings attached.

Jane was not like those women.

She moved with a sense of urgency. All of the earlier reservations had been forgotten in favor of pulling at his clothes, scraping her nails through his hair, and grinding against him in need, and as she kissed him, she bared herself – mentally, physically, emotionally – in a way he'd never experienced before. There were no barriers between them anymore. She gave herself fully with the only stipulation being that he do the same.

Pressing into her, he cast aside centuries of boundaries and paper-thin excuses, savored the smooth expanse of her neck as she arched into him, well near drowned in her breathlessly hissed yes when he withdrew only to reseat himself within her once more.

She was soft and slick, parting before him so easily and gripping him in a way that made his mind go white and fuzzy at the edges, and Loki felt himself falling. Away from her, into her… it didn't matter. All he could do was bury his head in the shadow of her neck, breath in the mingling scent of sweat and nature and him on her skin, and hold tight to her in an effort to either stay afloat or drag her down with him because, if this was a drug, he'd be damned if he was the only one addicted.

There was no going back now.

She was his.

And he was…

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1995: Norway

Moonlight sifted through the draped curtains, creating ocean wave patterns on the floor and bathing Jane's back in silver. Loki absentmindedly brushed the backs of his fingers down the vertebrae, through the dip of her waist. Even when she'd worn the high-necked, long-sleeved dresses of the earlier centuries, she'd never been particularly pale. Now, though… now the light turned her skin to snow, translucent to the point he could see the network of veins that lay beneath.

Shifting slightly, Loki repositioned against the headboard. Jane, curled into his side, stirred at the movement, mumbling something incoherent before draping an arm across his waist and nuzzling impossibly closer, and Loki gazed down at her, face a blank slate but mind a turbulent mess.

"Do you believe in fate, Jane Foster?"

He didn't know what had spurred the question. One moment, he'd been basking in post-coital contentment, all thoughts of realms and politics and princely duties forgotten; the next, he'd been giving voice to something he couldn't remember ever having deliberated.

She didn't believe, of course. Fate was too binding, too… controlling, and if there was one thing he'd learned during his time spent in Midgard, it was that humans wanted control. They craved it, needed it like they needed air to breathe, and Jane was no exception. Then again, with such fleeting lives, he could hardly blame them. The allure of control was one he understood all too well.
But fate was fate. Predetermined and unchangeable, the events of every being's life that had ever existed had been determined by the Norns eons in advance. All lives – Æsir or human, jötun or dwarf – were brought into existence with their path already established, every detail outlined from the individuals they would meet to the number of breaths they took. An iron-hard will couldn't change that. Neither could any manner of wishing.

At the same time, though…

"I find it hard to believe that, of all things, we were ordained to meet. Looking back, it seems like there was an awful lot of chance involved."

Had the Norns supplied him with the final seam that had taken him to that wrecked village all those years ago? Had Jane's life been spared over those of her kin for the sole purpose of them meeting? Had the idea of giving her the Iðunn apple been one of his volition or had the thought been granted to him because it was what he was meant to do?

"Do you believe in fate, Loki Odinson?"

The room was silent save for Jane's quiet breaths, but the question resonated loudly in the confines of his mind. With one finger, Loki followed the winding path of a vein over the slope of her shoulder and up the curve of her neck to where it disappeared beneath her jawbone. When he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, she sighed serenely, exhale warm across his chest.

Had they been brought together by fate itself?

Or had they found each other by a stroke of chance?

2005: Canada

She didn't know him.

"Please don't be insulted. I suffered a head injury a few years back and can't remember anything before that point, so it's entirely possible we have met and I just don't remember."

She didn't know him.

"Maybe if you tell me where you knew me from, it might jog something?"

There was an expectant smile on Jane's face, pure in its good-naturedness and innocent in a way he hadn't seen from her in centuries. Where had she been at the time? Anatolia? Poland? Bohemia? Wherever the location, it had been before the harsh reality of immortality had taken hold and tarnished her naïveté. But now that genuineness was back… all because she didn't remember the yawning expanse of her past, didn't realize eternity stretched before her still.

Words fell from Loki's mouth of their own accord. Functioning more on autopilot than anything else, he barely registered what they were, just that they settled into the inane conversations typical of Midgard. Even if they hadn't, it was unlikely he'd care.

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry. My name's Jane Foster. If I had any manners, I probably would've told you that earlier."
She knew her name.

"Luke…?"

She knew her name.

"Fair enough. So, Just Luke, can you shed any light on things I might have forgotten? Am I the person you thought I was?"

She knew her name.

But she didn't know him.

Loki had never really felt guilt. Guilt was a companion of regret, and with every step he made carefully analyzed, planned, and executed to perfection, regret wasn't an emotion he'd ever intimately courted. Now, though… now his skin was on fire with the memory of her touch, ignited by a simple handshake that meant nothing to her and everything to him. And when he subtly tried to reverse the effects of an injury he was apprehensive to consider the source of to no effect, he felt the ice-cold burn of what could only be regret.

To have come back…

To have swallowed anger and resentment and pride and still come up short because of a force more powerful than the magic at his disposal was…

"No, you're not." The wind was howling, or maybe it was only the blood rushing in his ears. "I was mistaken."

Apathy was a shield, and he wielded it well. Concealed behind it, he could play ignorance to the disappointment that shattered spider web cracks through her expression. He could tell himself that the beast raging in his chest was only a figment. He could pretend that the lingering glance he gave her before disappearing meant nothing.

But how could the Lie-Smith expect to lie to himself?

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2011: Asgard

Gungnir was warm beneath his hands, pulsed with an energy that pulled at his being, bid him to cast the final blow while Thor was beaten down and he held the upper hand. But Loki could do nothing more than feel the sneer evaporate into a stunned blankness as he stared at the figure attached to his arm.

Six years.

It had been six years since they'd last seen each other, but it might as well have been none.

He knew the exact shape of those delicate hands and the desperate pressure of the fingertips digging into his muscle. He knew the wild tangle of hair that whipped at his face and its ever-present hint of earth and wood and all things nature.

He knew the glare, those eyes, that particular shade of brown that resembled honeyed mead in
candlelight and the rock-hard determination glimmering in their depths that had been molded over the years, a diamond forged under the constant pressure of life.

"Jane?"

Immediately, the stalwart resolve cracked to reveal confusion, uncertainty, and even a trace of fear from between the fissures. The fingertips around his arm twitched imperceptibly as she sucked in a breath, brows knitting together. And Loki couldn't help but notice the almost unconscious way she leaned away from him.

Jane's tongue darted out to wet her lips in a nervous gesture he recalled all too well. It gave her time to gather her thoughts, weigh the options before speaking. Something she'd picked up over the millennium as a natural reaction to juggling countless identities. Loki knew that in the way he knew that her lower lip would always be caught between her teeth when in deep concentration or that her eyes would always widen in awe when taking in a sprawling landscape or that her hands would always find his when climaxing.

The moment stretched out between them in a seemingly endless impasse. At one point, something briefly flickered in her gaze, sharpened it, had it taking on a keener edge, but then the glint faded as quickly as it had appeared and her mouth slipped open and…

"How do you know my name?"

She didn't know him. Frozen in place, she stared up at him without recognition, eyes wary and filled with distrust. Jane Foster – the impulsive experiment turned curious pastime turned intriguing companion turned captivating lover – still didn't know him. It felt like the air had been displaced, swallowed by the relentless draw of the Void. Her chest was heaving with jagged, uneven breaths even as his burned with disuse, and Loki vaguely wondered where she found the oxygen that evaded him so readily. Then he wondered with more certainty how she had come to be standing before him at all.

He wasn't hallucinating. The hands still gripping his arm were real enough, as were the strands of hair that whipped at his face. But Jane's presence in the Realm Eternal was impossible. Unless…

Without warning, an object connected with Loki's left ankle. The momentum swept both legs out from beneath him, and he landed flat on his back, nonexistent air leaving his lungs in a rush as Gungnir slipped from his grasp to clatter on the bridge nearby. Having recovered, Thor was now kneeling above him. With one hand pressed into Loki's chest and Mjölnir raised high in the other, he kicked Gungnir out of reach.

"Fall back, Jane." Blood welled along the gash at Thor's jawline when he looked to her sharply. "Now!"

Loki paused, the hands that had instinctively gone to fight against the arm subduing him stilling.

"How do you know Jane?"

Shards of the bridge crunched beneath her boots, shattering like glass, and she issued a muffled yelp when she tripped on a larger chunk. Only once she'd reached what was apparently deemed a safe distance did Thor meet Loki's narrowed gaze.

"I think the better question would be how do you know her?"

Lip curling in a sneer, Loki conjured a dagger under the guise of magic intending to slice the underside of the arm above him. The blade was small but effective and would easily rend armor,
flesh, muscle, and, ideally, the tendons that would force the God of Thunder into dropping Mjölnir. Doing so would ensure his own victory, because while Thor was a respectable warrior in his own right, he could not prevail over Loki without the great hammer.

But then all the pieces fell into places.

Previously a jumble of unimportant facts, they now stacked neatly together, forming a complete and irrefutable picture even if the particulars behind it were a mystery. And realization, he found, was an unwelcome thing. The flood of ice-cold comprehension had him struggling to catch up, mouth working in soundless syllables until finally…

"This is the woman with whom you spent your exile?" Loki inclined his head, finding Jane's inverted eyes. "You?" The cackling laugh tore at the lining of his throat, vicious and callous. Slicing at Thor's arm wasn't an option anymore. He wanted to bury the dagger hilt-deep in Thor's gut. "You certainly have changed, brother, if you would consider using her as an equitable method of retaliation. Tell me, when did you find out?"

The heat of battle drained from Thor's eyes, leaving only a startled sense of bewilderment, and Mjölnir lowered slightly. "Find out what?"

"Don't play games with me." Loki spat the words like poison. Only a select few had ever been able to deceive him, and Thor had never been one of them. "What else would have made you seek out this particular woman?"

Dull reverberations began to echo through the bridge at the same time Jane called out. "There's someone coming!"

"You know as well as I that Father's banishment was uncompromising. I had no more control over where I was sent than I did the act itself."

It was a lie. There was no sign of dishonesty in Thor's face, but it had to be a lie. That was the only explanation. With a savage growl, Loki aimed a slash at Thor's face, but Mjölnir smashed into his wrist before the motion could be completed. His arm fell to the side, dagger-less and with broken edges of bones grinding against one another, when Thor raised him up only to slam him forcefully back onto the bridge.

"Why do you act this way, Loki?" Thor brought Mjölnir crashing into the bridge beside Loki's face, leaned closer, and demanded lowly. "Who is Jane Foster to you?"

However, Loki ignored the question completely. "You expect me to believe you knew nothing of her before your banishment?"

"Thor, there's someone else coming too!"

At Jane's yell, Thor glanced over to her, down the bridge to whoever was approaching, and then back to Loki in quick succession. "Jane and her companions bore witness to my fall and were kind enough to take me in when I was stranded. They knew nothing of me, nor I of them. Before experiencing the Destroyer and my restoration, they doubted my explanations of Yggdrasil."

It wasn't unreasonable to imagine Jane's reaction. Always doubting, always skeptical… he knew every nuance of her being, which meant he was well aware that it was the definitive of her to question. That did nothing to explain her newfound connection to Thor, though.

Still, it was not in Thor to deceive, and there remained no trace of even an attempt to do so in his expression. Familial ties might have been destroyed, but two millennia spent together had made him
aware of the Æsir's faults.

He did not lie well.

He wasn't lying now.

Which meant his claim, however improbable, could only be the truth.

"So it is fate that has intertwined the three of us so fully." Fury continued to simmer in Loki's veins, but he let his head fall back against the bridge with a sarcastic laugh. "The Norns, it seems, are not without a sense of irony."

"In what way are we three bound?" When he remained silent, Thor's attention lifted again to the slight figure outlined by the sky. "Jane?"

Jane's focus had been on the two figures making their way down the bridge, but she turned at her name, left arm thrown over her forehead to shield her face from the wind and right hand holding the hair gathered at her nape. Thor's chin dipped in a silent gesture, and Loki tilted his head in time to meet Jane's eyes. Brows knitted and lips pursed, she studied him for a long moment. There was no recognition, though – nothing of the thousand-year past they shared – and she looked back to Thor with a subtle shake of her head.

"You will be taken to the dungeons, but before that, youwilltell me..." The pressure from the hand on his chest increased as Thor jerked Mjölnir free to raise it once more. "How do you know Jane?"

Loki's mouth curled in a defiant sneer. "You speak as if you have some claim on her."

"She is not some prize to be collected."

"Not to mention you are satisfied with an answer from a woman who is unable to remember her own past."

"No, I am satisfied because—"

"How do you know that?" The whistling rush of the void pulled Jane's words to them, clear and loud and insistent, cleanly cutting off Thor. Crystal shards of the Bi-Frost cracked then crumbled beneath her boots when she took one step forward. "Do you..." She paused, swallowed hard. "How do you know I can't remember anything?"

The next jab intended for Thor died in Loki's throat. He hadn't meant to say anything else, nothing that would further allude to the past Jane and he shared, and yet, he unwittingly had. It was the loss of control again. Even after years spent apart, she continued to have that undesirable effect on him.

With a heavy sigh, Loki met her eyes. To lie, to correct himself, to explain the truth of everything... he didn't know what he intended to say. And he would never know because in the split-second he was engrossed with berating himself for his inadvertent implications, he overlooked the darkness behind Jane take form.

Throughout his two thousand years, Loki could say that he'd never experienced a moment where time stood still.

But when the blue-black of night transformed into the blue-black of a jötun, all of Asgard slowed to a halt.

The mouth splintered in a wicked grin, frost slunk over the surface of the bridge, and Jane's scream
rent the air as an inky hand snagged her arm. An ice spear flew from the darkness to pierce Thor's chest, throwing him off Loki and pinning him to the bridge with a yell of his own, and Loki barely had time to sit up before the jötun's shadow fell over him.

Unceremoniously, he was hauled to his feet. The armor disintegrated beneath the chill of the frost giant, but it was minor compared to the rime-black burn that marred Jane's skin. She'd stopped screaming, but there were shiny paths trailing down unnaturally pale cheeks as she struggled against her captor.

"Return me to Jötunheim, Lie-Smith."

Loki glanced to the right. Thor was having little luck with the spear. Buried deep in the bridge, he couldn't hold the weapon long enough to pull it out, and with it securing him on his back, he couldn't lift himself off it. The only help he could have given was with Mjolnir which, unfortunately, lay several feet away.

"Return me to Jötunheim…" The jötun yanked him closer, his breath reeking of slush and rotting meat. "Or watch the mortal die."

Loki glared. "You think a mortal's life matters to me?"

"This one's does. Our cousins told us as much." The temperature dropped, and Jane whimpered, briefly drawing the jötun's sinister gaze. "But let's put it to the test, shall we?" Dragging them to the fragmented edge of the bridge, the frost giant dangled Jane above the Void.

"No!"

Thor's distressed yell was nearly as loud as Jane's scream. Her feet pedaled the air madly, and her breath came in ragged pants, fingertips darkening in frostbite as she scrabbled at the hand holding her arm. The jötun, however, remained fixated on Loki.

"You have two options, Asgardian: escape and sacrifice the mortal's life, or take us all to Jötunheim in which I can guarantee her life, though not your own."

Space descended into the Void beneath them, the swirling chasm beckoning with its rush of wind that almost drowned out the approaching eight-legged stallion that could only be Sleipnir and its mount, Odin All-Father, newly awakened from the Odinsleep.

"Loki…"

Jane's pleading whisper had Loki's eyes snapping to hers, and within the shaky borders of his name, the past came up to meet him all at once. Explosions, screaming, fire; a petite form entrusting her safety to him as she fled a fire giant in war-torn Midgard. And a promise – so long as I am able, I will save you – a promise sealed with a kiss.

The jötun leered. "The choice is yours." Then he leapt off the edge of the bridge, both Jane and Loki in tow.

Chapter End Notes

Another divergence from the movie-verse! We’ll eventually loop back around to semi-canon events, but that’ll be a few chapters down the line. Also, I know everyone is
ready for Jane to regain her memories, but you’ll have to wait a little longer on that too. Things are slowly starting to come back. With all of the Asgardian and inter-realm information she’s encountering, though, you can expect her to start recognizing more and more things in the coming chapters.

A lot of you believed the item Loki had stolen from the fire giants was the Æðunn apple. The first section of this chapter should make it clear that whatever Loki took was much more important than that. And the item being hidden with Jane explains the coincidence of her always seeing signs of the fire giants over the years. They’d been tracking it. The item won’t be fully revealed until the third arc, so in the meantime, give me your best guess as to what you think it is and how Loki concealed it with Jane!

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Twenty-Three

“This is where the spiral catches you. This is where it starts.”

2011: Útgarðar, Jötunheim

The firmament was stained dark with smoke. It emerged from the flames that ringed the clearing like a shadowed wraith, danced its way through the shimmering heat-haze, wended skyward to cover the world in a blanket where protrusions were highlighted a flickering orange-red and cavities dyed black as pitch.

There were shapes behind the blazing wall. They stirred, crept to and fro, swelled and shrank all at once. And they shrieked… sacrificial wails, gunshot screams, and mournful cries that caused hair to stand on end and teeth to grind. It was enough to raise the dead, and Death rallied to their call, appearing as a murky, indistinct figure in the one-time meadow.

Jane jolted backwards. One foot disappeared into the myriad of skulls, and balance lost, she fell sideways to land face-to-face with a skeletal grin. The smoke clawed down her windpipe to scald the insides of her lungs, but she managed one inhale around the hacking cough, felt the raw beginnings of a shout in her throat before…

She woke with a violent start.

For one long moment, she didn't move. The dream of flames and skulls and shrouded figures was still too real – or it felt too real, at any rate – for her to do anything more than try to discern what was real and what was fabricated, which would've been an altogether easier task if anything she was looking at made sense.
Blue. That was all she could make out at first, a blur of blue. It was dark in some places, the color of ink or an oil-slick ocean. In others, it was the pale shade of backlit ice. From where she was situated, lying prone on the floor with her knees tucked to her chest and head pillowed on her arm, the world was tilted on its axis. Even after mentally rotating it into position, though, the scene remained unfamiliar.

Was she still dreaming?
Had she just traded one unsettling nightmare for another?

Jane blinked hard, squeezing her eyes so tightly together that rainbow bursts lingered even once she'd opened them, but nothing changed. Experimentally, she flexed her fingers. Her nails scraped against something that sounded real enough and there was a flash of discomfort when they dug into her palm, but again, everything stayed the same.

With a grimace, she pressed even harder.
Still nothing.

Emotions settling somewhere between confusion and frustration, she blew out a breath. Then she stared at the puff that hovered in front of her face like a cloud, transfixed. Her exhale swirled around, twisting in on itself repeatedly, and the longer she watched its progress, the more she began to register the soreness in her limbs. It was a bone-deep kind of pain that couldn't be attributed to any dream. But if it wasn't a dream, it had to be…

Jane sat up with a sharp jerk, wincing when her head cracked against what turned out to be a low, overhanging rock. Tears smarted in the corners of her eyes as she massaged the sore spot, but she only glared at the offending stone for a second before rotating to survey her surroundings.

The walls wrapped around, encasing her in an approximately fifteen-by-fifteen foot room. Three of the walls were solid rock. The fourth was open aside from crisscrossing bars that prevented both entry and escape. The room was topped by a domed ceiling some twenty to twenty-five feet overhead that contained a single skylight hewn through the rock. It shed little light, though. The only thing that fell through it was the faint, cold glow of a waning moon. That, and the occasional snowflake that escaped the wind whining across the opening.

Jane brushed the light dusting of snow from her hair and clothes. A few of the flakes melted against the warmth of her hand, but the majority of them floated to a ground that, after a double-take, revealed itself to be anything but normal. Hesitantly, she reached out, touched a single fingertip to the glassy surface, and quickly snatched it back.

It was ice.

The entire floor was one large sheet of ice.

A shiver that had nothing to do with the ground, snow, or frigid temperatures skittered down her back, and she cast a furtive glance to the barred wall at her left. Her heart tripped a quicker rhythm, apprehension pooling in the pit of her stomach like a leaden weight as she tried to piece everything together.

She'd been in New Mexico with Erik and Darcy monitoring atmospheric disturbances with possible ties to Einstein-Rosen bridges. No, that wasn't right. Or it was, but… Jane closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to the lids. There were more, flickering images that were slow to return, hovering just on the brink of clarity.
An automaton wreaking havoc on Puente Antiguo…

The rush of space-time within the Bi-Frost, interstellar matter an indistinct blur…

An explosion of pressure and crystal and light…

The two sparring figures…

The breathless jolt of recognition…

The monstrous shadow…

The heart-stopping leap into open space…

Impossible didn't even begin to describe everything that had happened. Jane clenched her teeth, breathed hard through her nose, and pressed her back so firmly to the wall that the rocks gouged into her spine. But the pain was real. The hard grind of stone on bone helped to ground her, kept her from falling into a dizzying spin, reassured her that she hadn't gone completely crazy. Good thing, too, because when she caught sight of the darkened flesh that ringed her upper arm, she almost hyperventilated. It didn't hurt – a cautious touch revealed it to be numb – but the memory of how she'd incurred it was enough to send her to the brink of passing out.

She desperately blinked away the black spots playing at the edges of her vision even as a distant part of her mind, detached from the current situation, calmly diagnosed the injury as frostbite. And if there had been any doubts before, they were long gone now. The cobalt figure, the subzero mist, the instantaneous ice-burn, the arctic surroundings… all the signs pointed to the frozen realm of Erik's stories, and Jane knew she was in Jötunheim in the same way she unexplainably knew about the Norns and Heimdall.

Using the wall for support, she carefully stood and half-walked, half-skidded across the floor towards the barred opening. It was slow progress. Her muscles ached from the combined events in Puente Antiguo and Asgard, making her significantly more unsteady. Still, she made it there without falling.

The bars, as it turned out, were not steel or iron or even stone like she'd assumed. They were ice, same as the floor. She ignored that fact, though, diligently filing it away in favor of wrapping her hands around them and peeking out of the cell, looking first to the blank wall opposite her and then down the corridor that extended to her left and right.

"Hello?"

Jane's voice rebounded eerily off the rocks, and too late, she wondered whether or not it would've been better to remain quiet. There was no telling what the giants would do once they found out she was awake. Erik's stories hadn't told her much, but her two experiences with the beings so far hadn't been very encouraging. In one, they'd attacked Sif and the Warriors Three. During the other, she'd been used as collateral to force Loki's hand.

Thoughts of Loki brought on thoughts of Thor, and her heart hurt at not knowing what had happened to the God of Thunder. The last she'd seen, he'd still been pinned by the spear. A twinge shot through her, remembering his expression, the unbridled worry for her in those last fateful seconds. She could only hope that whoever had been following the giant down the bridge was friendly and had released him.

That was about all she could do, hope for Thor's safety. There was no way for him to help her now. By no means was she an expert in inter-realm travel, but if the Bi-Frost was destroyed and that was how they'd travelled from Earth to Asgard… well, it wasn't a stretch to assume she was beyond
Thor's reach. But if that were the case, how had she gotten to this realm? The giant couldn't have done it himself. That last scene on the bridge was startlingly vivid, which meant she remembered the giant's proposition clearly.

Her life in return for passage to Jötunheim…

Did Loki know of another way to transport people between realms? That was what the giant's demand had suggested. Even if he did, why would he subject himself to whatever nefarious plan the giants had in store for him just to save her life? From what she'd witnessed, there was no love lost between the two brothers, so it was unlikely Loki felt any responsibility for her on Thor's behalf.

Unless his sense of responsibility didn't stem from Thor.

Loki had known her. If his astonishment when seeing her the first time, his irrational anger at Thor having spent his banishment with her, and the simple fact that he knew her name without introduction wasn't convincing enough, him knowing that she didn't remember her past was. There was no way he could've known that. Thor didn't even know that. For Loki to have that kind of information wasn't possible, and yet…

Jane pressed her forehead to the ice bars and stared at an adjacent cell just barely visible from her own. All she could make out were the gridlock of bars at the entrance. The interior of the cell was completely dark, a yawning blackness. If anyone was inside, they were hidden by the gloom.

In a blink that was just as obscure as the inside of the other cell, she relived that last moment when Loki's troubled gaze met her own. The giant's threat, the shattered bridge, the swirling Void… chaos had surrounded them, but for one timeless second the world had stood still until there was nothing except the two of them. One human, one god. Brought together by a mutual peril and bound by something nameless. And it was that something that needled the back of Jane's mind. She couldn't quite place it – not that that was unexpected – but whether she wanted to think about it or not, that something remained.

Something that had fought to remain hidden in the depths of grey-green orbs even as they'd been thrown wide at her plea…

Something that had tried to claw its way to the surface from the murky corners of a past long forgotten…

Jane stared intently at the other cell. What had happened between their plunge off the edge of the Bi-Frost and her waking up in the cell? What had convinced Loki to come to her aid rather than leave her to her fate? Better yet, what had caused him to look at her like she was a ghost back from the dead, for her to feel the nagging suspicion that there was something more going on? What secrets did the past hold?

"Loki?"

Her fingers were starting to go numb on the bars, but she just held them tighter, clinging as close as possible to stage-whisper down the corridor. It was a long shot that he was being kept in the other cell. Having witnessed the extent of Thor's power and knowing Loki had almost bested him in Asgard, she doubted a simple grid of ice would hold him. Still, he was the only person she even remotely knew in the realm, and if he was the only one capable of bringing them to Jötunheim with the Bi-Frost destroyed, he was also the only one who could take them back.

"Loki?" Emboldened, Jane whispered a little louder. "Loki, are you there?" But there was no reply, nothing except the question echoing faintly back. Throwing caution to the wind, she called loudly,
voice cracking on the keen edge of panic. "Is anyone there?"

The minutes passed, but nothing interrupted the silence. Terror was a lump in her throat, and she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but grip the bars so firmly that her nails bent under the pressure because she was trapped in a realm drudged up from history's myths with no way of getting home.

She was alone.

She was imprisoned.

Every twenty-four hours, Earth completed one full rotation on its axis, otherwise known as a solar day. The moon orbited Earth every twenty-seven days while the International Space Station, travelling at seventeen thousand two hundred miles per hour, completed one every ninety-three minutes. It took the Earth three hundred sixty-five days to circle the sun, and the entire solar system orbited the center of the Milky Way Galaxy every estimated two hundred twenty-five to two hundred fifty million years.

They were all constant facts, all capable of measuring time.

However, it was impossible to judge the passing time in Jötunheim.

The realm apparently offered no sun, which meant the light never really changed, just shifted from one side of the cell to the other as the cold moon made its way across the sky. It still would've been enough to separate the endless block of time into days… that was, if she knew what constituted one day in Jötunheim.

Without a watch or cell phone, Jane was forced to rely on circadian rhythm to gauge the length of time she'd been in the cell. But that wasn't a wholly accurate method either. First, because she had no idea how long she'd been in Jötunheim before waking up. Second, because everything ran together without a way for her to mark the days. And third, because a fifteen-by-fifteen foot room sporting a floor made of ice wasn't exactly conducive to physical activity, so between idleness and the unchanging light, her circadian rhythm was rapidly dissolving.

The Bible claimed that God created light on the first day, separated it from the darkness to form day and night, morning and evening. If that was true, God didn't exist in Jötunheim. There was no dawn or dusk, no morning or afternoon or evening, no light or dark. What was once night and day was now only sleep and awake.

Jane's legs trembled as she squatted above the pail in the far corner of the cell. A trace of wind curled through the opening in the ceiling causing a fresh round of goosebumps to break out across her bared thighs. With a shiver, she straightened and pulled up her pants, leaning heavily against the wall to catch her breath. Once her muscles had steadied, she shuffled to the opposite wall, cocooned herself in the blanket until only her eyes and nose showed, and collapsed.

Warmth began to fill the space as she breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. It was a moist sort of warmth that would make it doubly miserable whenever she had to emerge from the blanket. The time spent wrapped up was worth it, though. She couldn't remember how cold was too cold for human survival anymore, but those first few nights had to have been close.
Both items – the pail and the blanket – had appeared what she thought was eight *sleeps* ago. She hadn't heard anything. One minute she'd been half-awake, staring at the emptiness of the cell; the next, she'd been opening her eyes to see her cell's newest accessories. Immediately, she'd huddled in the blanket and taken sparing sips from the water in the pail. Only once it was empty did she turn it into a toilet.

Jane let her head fall back against the wall, eyes drifting listlessly to the pile of bones in one of the other corners. The moonlight gleamed off the abnormally long line of a femur, highlighted the smooth curve of the skull.

Hidden in the shadows, she hadn't noticed the skeleton in her initial survey of the cell. It was only a few hours later when she'd been examining the walls for any sign of weakness that she'd stumbled across it. Literally stumbled. There was still a large, yellow-purple bruise visible through the rip in her jeans where her knee had rammed into the ice.

At first, the skeleton had been disconcerting.

Now it was just another part of her surroundings.

Most of the bones were bare, pale white and stripped clean. There were a few, though, that had been preserved by the temperatures and still displayed a splotchy layer of meat – the pelvic bone, the dips between some of the vertebrae, a couple ribs – although those were mostly covered by the threadbare remains of a cloak draped over emaciated shoulders.

If she had more energy, she'd probably be worried by just how little its presence bothered her. It wasn't exactly normal to be in the company of a giant skeleton. Then again, it wasn't normal to be imprisoned in an icy cell by frost giants that inhabited a realm no one believed to exist either. Normalcy, it seemed, was in increasingly short supply.

A loud growl unexpectedly rent the silence, and Jane pressed one hand to her stomach. Holding tight to the blanket to contain the warmth, she brought her knees to her chest and looped her arms around them. Hunger was a persistent ache, her only companion besides the macabre carcass, but she wasn't hungry enough yet to touch the plate that had appeared three *sleeps* ago.

"I'm not going to eat that."

Jane looked pointedly to the stack of raw meat sitting atop the plate. Sinew and gristle cut pale lines through the lumps, and exposure had darkened the outer edges from a bright red to a dull brown. The chunks were too large to eat in one bite even if she'd wanted to – which she didn't – and she wasn't about to gnaw at them like some starving animal – which she felt close to becoming.

"I have no idea what it came from, much less if it's safe for humans to eat." Despite her hollow stomach's protests, she glanced at the skeleton. "Feel free to have my share."

A twisted grimace was her only reply, and Jane shifted uncomfortably. She was talking to a pile of bones. Was that the effect of prolonged isolation? Gradual deterioration until she was having a one-sided conversation with a dead being like it was the most normal thing in the world? And there was that word *normal* again…

She sighed, instantly frowning at the smell that seeped from within the blanket. The cold prevented sweating, thereby cutting down a good majority of the body odor, but her breath still reeked, her hair was a greasy mess, and she didn't even want to think about the effects no toilet paper was having elsewhere on her body. Not that she had anyone to impress. Dead people were easy to please.
"Did you know I can survive for three weeks without food?" When her stomach rumbled again, Jane rested her chin on her knees. "Gandhi lived for twenty-one days on only sips of water. So long as someone brings me another pail of water soon, I'll be able to hang on for a while longer."

It had taken three or four days before she'd stopped thinking of time in days, and it had been probably eight sleeps since the first pail and blanket had appeared. Assuming one sleep cycle was the equivalent of one day, she'd been in Jötunheim for almost two weeks. That only left one week to either give in and eat the meat or starve.

Jane really hoped she was wrong on the number of days she'd been there.

"They'll bring more water soon." The statement sounded considerably more confident than she felt. "Loki obviously held up his end of the bargain, which means they'll honor theirs." She decided against tacking on the hopefully that whispered from the back of her mind. "I should probably put my other pail by the entrance, though… just in case they need it back or something."

But that involved getting up and dropping the blanket and walking and carrying, and she couldn't find the strength to stand, let alone do everything else. Lying down was far easier, exhausted as she was. It felt like she'd run a marathon, but the only thing she could remember doing was making the fifteen foot trek to use her makeshift bathroom.

"It can wait for a bit." Jane curled up on the ice, cheek pillowed on her hand and back against the rock wall, as her eyes closed. "I'll just… rest a little… first."

"Just one piece?"

"No. The human must be kept alive."

"She doesn't need both legs to live."

The world was a fog, a haze of blurred shapes and twisting shadows, an endless mess of white on grey on black. And it was cold. The miasma filled Jane's lungs with frost until she felt she was drowning, arms and legs frozen stiff at her sides. She shifted, nose scrunching when something scratched against her cheek. Maybe it was the wool blanket. Maybe it was the ice. It all felt the same, either way.

"If the Asgardian finds she's been damaged, he will be less inclined to cooperate."

"He refuses to cooperate now. Perhaps it will… persuade him otherwise." There was a shuffling, the dull scrape of bone on ice. "Regardless, I doubt he's aware of much anything anymore. He'll not know if she has two legs or none by the time they meet again. If they meet again."

"We are forbidden to touch the human. None will stand in your way should you ignore that command, but obedience would be wise. With everything that has happened, you will not find Skaði so forbearing as Laufey."

Jane rolled to her back, wincing when her cheek ripped free from where it had been half-frozen to the ice. The voices that had sounded tinny and distant at first were now becoming clearer, but she couldn't open her eyes to see if they were real or merely a product of her imagination. One hand found its way from beneath the blanket to rub weakly at her face.
"A waste. Look at her, she's naught more than skin and bones. Barely a decent bite as it is." Jane couldn't disagree. The knobby ends of her radius and ulna jutted through skin stretched too thin, and her fingernails felt like claws against her papery eyelids. "How long can they last on water alone?"

"It matters not. She'll eat soon."

"And if she doesn't?"

The volume of the voices had changed, become fainter as if their owners had turned away. "We will have upheld our end of the bargain as best we could. The Midgardian's death will not be on our hands."

"Then we can eat her?"

"Yes." Above the sounds of withdrawal came a grating chuckle. "Then we can eat her."

The instinct for survival was a force to be reckoned with. People found the strength to lift cars to free themselves when trapped while animals caught in snares chewed off their own legs in a bid to escape. It was the basest nature of all things, to live. And no matter how much the mind protested, instinct would always win out in the end.

So when it all became too much, Jane crawled the length of the cell, hunched over the plate, and ate every piece of the raw meat.

Cold, blue, silent… the cell was unchanging, but Jane's dreams were a kaleidoscope of noise and color and warmth. The hundred thousand variations of blue exploded in a firework display, the shards rearranging themselves into a place where she was able to run through a green meadow beneath a summer-yellow sky. And if the borders of the dream were tinted with a scalding red, it didn't really matter.

Was it possible to simultaneously suffer from a fever and freeze to death? Or was it just when a person was so cold that they stopped feeling cold, everything felt that much warmer? She remembered one of her Culver professors talking about the effects of long-term exposure, but couldn't remember what exactly he'd said.

"Wake up, girl."

She had to be hallucinating. A side effect of the fever, no doubt. Only one time had she heard something other than her own raw voice since waking up as a prisoner of Jötunheim – even then she wasn't sure that had been real – but the new voice was completely different. Smooth and higher pitched, it was unquestionably feminine.

"Girl."

How many sleeps had it been since she'd arrived? How many since reality had descended into myth?
Time into an unending oblivion? She already held one-sided conversations with a skeleton... how much more would it take before she could be deemed mentally impaired?

"Jane."

It was the sound of her name – spoken out loud, a real and tangible thing – that finally helped pry open her eyes. Even still, it took a moment for things to fall into place. She looked first at the thin dusting of snow over the ice, then the rough wall opposite her, and lastly to the woman standing just beyond the cell bars, one eyebrow quirked and a half-smile on her mouth.

"I figured that would do the trick." The woman pulled her braid over one shoulder and absently tossed the ends, intense gaze never faltering. "Nevertheless, it's quite the development."

"You..." A lack of adequate nourishment was making her confusion all the worse, and struggling to sit up, Jane frowned at the visitor. "You're not..." She scanned the dark hair, the ivory skin, the waif-like form. "Blue."

"How very astute." The woman's chuckle was as delicate as her figure, if not a little wry. "Though I hope you have more to offer else he is sure to grow weary of you."

It was another thinly-veiled insult that Jane was beginning to associate as commonplace with all beings of other realms, but that didn't prevent her frown from deepening. "What?"

"I can only guess as to what draws him as it is."

"Who?"

"You're appealing enough for a human, but desire will only carry things so far."

"Excuse me?"

"Whatever it may be, I hope it's worthwhile. I am not in the habit of taking risks for those who have done nothing for me in return."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The woman finally paused, jaw falling momentarily slack in surprise as she stared through the bars. Not that Jane could blame her. There were no reflective surfaces in the cell, but she highly doubted her visitor had expected such vehemence from a wasted human that hadn't bathed in who knew how long, hadn't eaten a proper meal in even longer, and had subsisted almost exclusively on water for the past... was it twenty-five sleeps now or closer to thirty?

Silence as loud as the shout still bouncing off the stones rang between them, and Jane took a second to study the woman. The sharp gaze, the proud tilt of her chin, the natural elegance ingrained in her very being... there was an air to her, a flawlessness that couldn't be denied. Whoever the woman was, she wasn't human. But with her pale skin and flowing gown and average height, she wasn't an inhabitant of Jötunheim either.

Thinking had become a useless thing during her captivity. Countless awakes had been spent contemplating, but she'd always ended up running in circles, chasing elusive answers. Eventually, she'd stopped thinking altogether. Now, forced to reason and confront and form shapeless thoughts into actual words and logical sentences, her head pounded. Jane's focus lowered from the woman to the floor to the scuffed toe of her boot. One hand eased
from within the folds of the blanket to cradle her head when it too dropped, the thumb and middle finger massaging at her temples.

As if the general mystery of why she was being kept an isolated prisoner in a foreign realm wasn't enough, she now had a visitor that obviously didn't belong, somehow knew her name, and liked to associate her with someone she apparently should know. A sigh clouded the air in front of her. What she wouldn't give for some hardcore answers.

"Loki." Jane's head snapped up so quickly her neck popped, but the woman didn't even spare her a glance, attention following the path of a fingernail she idly ran down one of the ice bars. "I speak of the one they call the Lie-Smith."

The blanket slipped from Jane's shoulders when she leaned forward, pooling around her hips unnoticed. "You know Loki?"

"It's you he calls for." Slate-blue eyes cut to warm-brown. "Jane…" The woman breathed the name, and the cold light turned the slate-blue to ice when they lifted to span the length of the ceiling. "The name echoes through the city like a prayer. Or a plea."

"He's alive, then?"

It was an idea she was almost scared to entertain. In the beginning, she'd held onto the hope that someone – Thor, Loki, the Warriors Three; she'd even take Freyr and his inappropriate advances – would find and rescue her, but that hope had gradually died out until she'd assumed those in the other realms unable to reach her and Loki either escaped or dead.

But if he was still alive…

"For now." Casually unassuming, the woman's gaze slid to the bars again, watched as ice flaked away in the wake of the nail that continued to drag across the surface. "Though he may not wish it, considering what he is being subjected to."

Jane scrabbled to find purchase on the rocks and pulled herself to her feet, forcing her emaciated muscles into action. "But he is alive?" She needed to hear the confirmation, needed to know for sure.

"Yes."

Immediately, her heart raced, pounding in her throat in a way it hadn't since she'd first woken up. This time it wasn't in fear, though, it was in anticipation. Loki was alive. For how long, she didn't know – the woman's comment didn't exactly bode well – but as long as he was alive, there was still hope she could get out of Jötunheim, go home to Erik and Darcy, to Thor.

And that was when she knew without a shadow of a doubt that the woman was no illusion, no figment of her fevered dreams, no companion borne from isolation. After all, there was little sense in her mind conjuring up things to give her false hope when that hope had already been dashed and cast away. It was that certainty that spurred her to take one quivering step forward.

"Look, I don't know who you are, what you're doing here, or how you even got here…" Jane swayed, fingers reaching back to the wall just in case. "But can you help me escape? I mean, you're obviously not one of those—"

"Am I not?" The woman cut in with a smile. Red flashed through the slate-blue eyes while the teeth sharpened almost imperceptibly before returning to normal. "Not all is as it seems."

Jane fought the urge to retreat to the back of the cell. "You're not an Asgardian." There was no use
in phrasing it as a question when she already knew the answer.

"Hardly."

"Then who are you?" It was becoming hard to swallow around the knot in her throat. "Why are you here?"

The wind howled across the opening in the ceiling, depositing a flurry of snow into the cell and lowering the temperature a few degrees. It hadn't taken Jane long to realize that the weather in Jötunheim was never pleasant – there was always wind, snow, and a bitter cold – but some days were worse than others. Today was one of those days. A storm was brewing outside.

"I am… exactly who you'd want to see right now. Assuming you knew what you needed, that is."

The woman inhaled deeply, gaze lingering down the corridor before sliding to the bars. "Did you know ice created by a jötun can only be dissolved by a jötun? Of course you didn't. You might have an idea, though. These are your marks, no?"

Even several feet away from the front of the cell, Jane could clearly see the shallow gouges in the ice, the dark stain of blood smeared across several of them. Her fingers twitched of their own accord at the memory. Most of her fingernails had grown back, but a few were still cracked and broken. Only one was missing entirely.

"Desperation manifests itself differently for everyone. What would you do to return to those you care for?" The woman's slim fingers wrapped loosely around one of the bars. "How far are you willing to go?"

"Depends… is that a rhetorical question, or is there an offer hidden in there somewhere?"

Eyes that were now fully blue again snapped to Jane's. Weighing, evaluating, judging… their regard was heavy, stifling to the point she wanted to pull at her shirt collar that suddenly felt too tight around her neck. The discomfort was quickly forgotten, though, when the woman's fingers tightened and a foot-long stretch of the bar melted away.

Jane took another step forward, steadier this time than before. "So you are one of them."

"My name is Gerðr." A second length of ice disappeared. "And if you give me your word that you will find Loki and have the Bi-Frost rebuilt…" Then a third and a fourth. "I will free you from this prison."

"I thought you didn't take risks for people unless there was something in it for you."

"Why do you think I wish the Bi-Frost be restored?" Pieces of ice continued to vanish, leaving sporadic gaps large enough to tempt but too small to fit through. "I am as much a prisoner as you. This realm may be my birthplace, but it is not my home. Fulfilling your half of the bargain would grant me what I need: a way back to Asgard."

The name that had been jangling in the back of Jane's mind, familiar yet difficult to place what with the blur of twenty-something days and sleeps running together, suddenly sharpened into focus. Scarcely daring to breathe, she maneuvered the last bit of icy floor until she stood directly before the woman.

"I know you. Gerðr…" The disguised frost giant arched an eyebrow. "You're Freyr's wife."

Surprisingly enough, Gerðr didn't seem nearly as stunned by the revelation as Jane felt at discovering it. "Has my husband been entertaining humans again?" Her mouth tightened into a thin line as she
exhaled a long-suffering sigh. "We've discussed that before."

"No!" Jane shook her head. "No, he… um… well, you see… he…" Technically, he had tried to *entertain* her, but that probably wasn't the best thing to admit at the moment. "It's a long story."

It was the truth.

A blatantly obvious attempt at side-stepping a much larger issue that Gerðr was well aware of, if her expression was anything to go by, but still the truth.

Gerðr's hand dropped from the bars to her side, and she rotated, facing down the corridor. Worried that she'd ruined her only means of escape, Jane was just about to insist that nothing had happened between them and she'd, in fact, turned Freyr down, when Gerðr spoke.

"Do we have an accord, Jane of Midgard?"

Every cell in her body was screaming *yes*, but Jane hesitated, remembering the conversation she'd overheard. "You're not going to try and eat me as soon as I'm out, are you?" Gerðr blinked and looked to Jane, confused. "It's just, I heard… or I'm pretty sure I heard… I was a little out of it at the time… a couple giants were talking about…" She gestured vaguely. "You know…"

If Gerðr's chuckle was delicate, her laugh was like the chiming of church bells. The genuineness of it was clear in the scrunched nose, the soft wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She really was beautiful. It was easy to see how Freyr had fallen for her.

"I will admit that nothing in all the realms tastes quite like a human." Jane quickly rescinded her assessment. Imagining Gerðr feasting on a human kind of ruined all images of beauty. "But I have no intentions of eating you. Not today."

"Fantastic." The sarcasm laced through her voice was stark. "But I still don't understand… why not free Loki yourself?"

It didn't make sense. Gerðr was a frost giant that had grown up in this realm, probably lived in this very city, knew the passageways like the back of her hand. She possessed power over ice, the inherent strength of her people. Then there was Jane. Unfailingly determined, reliably stubborn… but painfully mortal. What could she possibly do that Gerðr couldn't?

Gerðr lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "I don't care much for serpents." Their eyes met when another length of ice disappeared. "And it is not my name he calls."

"Why—"

The rest of her sentence cut off abruptly. Jane had felt confused when waking up in Sweden with a blank memory, but that was nothing compared to what she was experiencing now. Gods and giants? Mythical realms? Things that she knew without knowing how coming back without warning or explanation? And serpents. What the hell did snakes have to do with anything?

Jane swallowed thickly. "Why would Loki be calling for me?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" Gerðr grinned, not unkindly but not overly reassuring either. "Unfortunately, I've not come seeking answers as to your relationship with the son of Odin. I have proposed to you an agreement. All that remains is your reply."

Find Loki. That would be easy enough if Gerðr pointed her in the right direction. Convincing him to take her back to Asgard would be a bit more of a challenge considering everything he'd done before
the giant had forced him to Jötunheim. But the real crux was rebuilding the Bi-Frost. Gerðr seemed to think Loki capable of fixing it. Jane didn't know if he could – or would – but if he didn't, could she?

"So what will it be, Jane?"

Jane braced her hands against the cold rock on either side of the narrow opening, stuck her head into the darkness, and inhaled deeply. Instantly, she recoiled. The wet, choking sound of her dry heaving reverberated in the domed chamber, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the noise as she backtracked.

"Well…" She murmured, swallowing the bile at the back of her throat. "I guess that rules that one out."

Keeping a watchful eye on the circle of doorways, she crossed to one she’d inspected earlier. It was the only option available. However, one was all she needed. Her boot scuffed against a raised section of the floor, sending a stray rock clattering across the surface, and she paused to listen carefully for any sign that she'd been heard.

Nothing.

Silence was a good thing – that meant she hadn't been found out yet – but it wasn't enough to prevent the hairs from rising on the back of her neck. She felt like an animal, frightened and on edge, prey on the run. With a shiver, Jane finished the short trek. Despite any reservations she might have felt, Gerðr hadn't steered her wrong, and so, trust reassured, she slipped into the passage her liberator had indicated.

"Follow this corridor…" Gerðr gestured to the right. "And at every split, follow the path to the left. The passage will eventually open to an antechamber with multiple doorways. All but one lead to more dungeons. You'll have to find the one that leads out on your own."

Jane alternated between staring down the corridor and at the mostly-dissolved bars that had held her captive for almost a month. "How will I know which one to take?"

"A human's olfactory senses are not as keen as ours, but they will be enough in this case."

"What?"

"You need to smell your way out." Gerðr issued a sigh, looking very much like she was explaining something to a small child. "If it smells of death and decay, choose another path."

"Okay…" It didn't sound anywhere close to okay, but she didn't have much of a choice. If she wanted to get home, this was what she had to do. "What do I do after that?"

"Continue until the path splits. One way will lead outside; the other, to Loki. You will be able to hear him by that point, so the choice will be clear. And here…" Jane automatically grasped the dagger Gerðr shoved into her hand. "When the time comes, you'll likely need this."

The steel blade pressed against her hip as she jogged down the path, a constant reminder of the seriousness of the situation. What, exactly, it would be needed for, she didn't know. She probably
didn't want to know. Regardless, if Gerðr had given it to her, there must have been a good reason, and she hadn't delayed in shoving the eight-inch dagger into the waistband of her jeans.

Now she just had to be careful not to trip and fall and slice her leg off.

For the umpteenth time, she breathed thanks to whatever god, being, or interstellar alien might be listening for the relatively flat floor. She'd stumbled occasionally at the beginning – her legs hadn't been quite up to the challenge of running yet – but she'd gotten stronger with every step, pulled from her weakened state by a combination of adrenaline and fresh air.

A breeze drifted down the corridor to meet her, and she inhaled it greedily. Just as Gerðr had said, the other passages leading from the antechamber had smelled of decay. Putrid meat, dirty slush, the stink of excrement and filth… she hadn't realized how badly the dungeons reeked until she was away from it all. Even now, she'd catch the intermittent waft of the scents still embedded in her soiled clothing and gag.

But above it all was the clean air. Her mouth was thick with stale blood and saliva, but her lungs were filled with the wind-thin smell of ice and snow, of crisp water that wended from mountainsides, the sharp bite of cold. It was refreshing. Rejuvenating. And she knew that she could do this, whatever this ended up entailing.

Jane followed the path as it curved to the left. However, it ended as soon as she rounded the corner, cutting off in a blunt T. Her steps slowed until she stood motionless in the intersection, looking back and forth, left to right.

What now?

Gerðr had said she'd be able to hear Loki by now, but the only noise in the passage was her own ragged panting. If she got out of this, she needed to join a gym. Without warning, a yell rent the stillness. It was jagged, raw and grating, issued forcibly through gritted teeth, and goosebumps prickled down Jane's back unbidden as she turned towards the sound.

Was that…?

It had to be.

A call tailed the last traces of the yell. Pain garbled the word and made it unintelligible, but the longer she listened, the more it began to sound suspiciously like…

Jane took off to the right, sprinting down the last stretch of corridor. It twisted and turned, doubled back and then back again in a winding, snake-like pattern. But she refused to slow. The end was in sight and the darkness lessening. A cool light outlined the upcoming exit, the walls eased from coal-black to flame-blue… and when the tunnel opened to another cavernous antechamber, she immediately spotted Loki in the center, bound beneath the gaping maw of a massive snake.

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – Gerðr, as mentioned a couple chapters back, is a frost giant and became Freyr's wife after he bargained away a magic sword to marry her. I didn't go into details of why she was in Jötunheim when the Bi-Frost was destroyed, but let's just assume she was visiting family. Also, apologies for the general lack of Loki in
this chapter. He’ll obviously be back in the next one, and there will be a significant amount of Jane/Loki action in the chapters to come. Hang in there!

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Twenty-Four

“You are shadow, wreathed in the judgment of darkened cathedrals, bloodied rose gardens, and sacramental souls lying scattered on the floor. And I... I am frightened by your scent like opium, like rust in the rain.”

2011: Munnr Død, Jötunheim

Blue flames bathed the chamber in a cold, flickering light. Scattered across the room, fires burned on seemingly nothing, contained in shallow basins atop waist-high pedestals. It was a welcome reprieve from the relative gloom of the cell where Jane had been imprisoned, but the dancing light also made the shadowed corners that much darker and she instinctively shrunk away from the swatch of black to her right.

Odds were it contained nothing except frigid air and stone. Even if something more sinister lurked there, it couldn't have been anything too overtly frightening. With an enormous snake winding around the room, anything else would have seemed mild by comparison.

Jane's breathing had gradually slowed from her escape through the dungeons, but her heartbeat had yet to follow suit. It raced along, rhythm so strong she could feel it in the hollow at the base of her throat, could taste its coppery flavor on the back of her tongue, and she absentmindedly thought, if it leapt any higher, she'd choke on it. Perhaps that was what people meant when they spoke of choking on fear.

Slinking quietly, she half-hid behind the nearest pedestal and eyed Loki.

His arms were firmly tethered, stretched tight between twin columns. The armor that had gleamed in the last light of the Bi-Frost in Asgard was gone, and what little clothing remained hung in tattered
strips. A glimpse through the gaps revealed skin that was ghostly pale in some places, charred black in others.

After having witnessed Thor's power and knowing Loki had been able to hold his own against the God of Thunder, it was strange to see him look so... helpless. His head flopped forward listlessly, dark hair curtaining off his face, and if not for the faint scrabbling of his feet in an attempt to stand, she would've thought him unconscious. Or dead.

The fire before her emitted no heat, so there was nothing to stave off the shiver that skittered down her spine at the sight. It probably wouldn't have helped anyway. The chill in her bones had nothing to do with the temperature. Gradual starvation hadn't been easy by any means, but all of a sudden, her time in captivity didn't seem nearly so bad.

Jane took a deep breath, grabbed the edge of the basin, and peered more fully around the flames. Her first impulse upon entering the room had been to rush to Loki's aid. It was still there, the want to cross the room and unbind him, drag him to a safer place – if there was such a thing in Jötunheim – where he could recover and eventually take her back to Asgard. Her muscles twitched with the urge to go to him.

There was just one problem.

One immense, cold-blooded, coiled problem.

Almost reluctantly, Jane's attention slid to the serpent poised over Loki. It was impossible to say what she'd expected to see. Traversing realms and experiencing magic and suffering one unexplainable moment of déjà vu after another tended to have that sort of effect on a person, numb nerve endings until normal was a relative term. Still, she could honestly say that a giant snake had never crossed her mind.

Its body curled around the antechamber, nearly as thick in diameter as she was tall. One end tapered into a pointed tail a little ways to her left while the head towered some twenty feet above the rest of the room, neatly framed by the same columns to which Loki was bound. Glittering eyes peered from deep-set sockets outlined by a horned brow. If their chilling stare wasn't enough to induce a shiver, the open maw that revealed a pair of ivory fangs was.

Jane nervously fingered the hilt at her waist. Compared to the six-foot long fangs, Gerðr's blade wouldn't be of any real use if the snake decided to strike, but it gave her some small sense of comfort nonetheless. She had a weapon. And if she had to purposefully look past the fact that being armed reassured her in order to maintain the last threads of sanity, so be it.

A shallow groan cut through the silence, and Jane's attention snapped back to Loki.

With clenched fists, he pulled against the bonds, drug his feet beneath him, and managed to stand. The movements stirred his clothing, and she was amazed to see that the skin beneath was completely unblemished. It remained an unhealthy shade but no longer sported the blackened patches from before. Even though his head continued to loll weakly, he was clearly stronger than when she'd first come in.

Her fingernails scraped against the basin as she watched his spine unfurl. Whatever the giants had done obviously hadn't been enough to injure him past the point of recovery. She didn't know anything about Asgardian physiology, but they seemed fairly indestructible. If Loki's faded wounds were any indication, they healed faster than normal as well. Or at least he did – she remembered Heimdall, Lady Sif, and the Warriors Three having to be treated by the healers – which was all that really mattered.
When the last vertebrae straightened, Loki slowly lifted his head until he was gazing up at the serpent. For one long moment, he was motionless. Mouth parted, eyes blown wide, a lock of hair draped across his face... it was like he was enraptured by the creature above him. But then his teeth clenched along with his fists, and he heaved against his bonds.

The tendons in his wrists jutted out, visible even across the room as he threw his weight backwards, and the stones creaked in response, dust raining down from where the columns joined the ceiling. It took a second for Jane to realize the low growl filling the room came from Loki. When she did, she leaned forward unconsciously.

"Come on..."

Her encouragement was barely audible, a ghost of a whisper on the exhale, but she didn't dare say it any louder. The last thing she wanted was to distract Loki when he was on the brink of escape. Instead, she bit her lip, virtually humming with the hope that bloomed in her chest, filling the space with a warmth the blue flames lacked and providing the fuel of adrenaline to her exhausted body.

Blood welled from under the ties around Loki's wrists, ran down his forearm, and dripped from his elbow, bright red for the split-second before it mixed with the dirt on the ground to turn a muddy grey. He didn't falter, though, just repeatedly leaned forward and jerked backward causing dust to fall in regular intervals and the stones to groan beneath the onslaught.

The urge to run to Loki returned tenfold, and Jane eased around the pedestal, keeping a wary eye on the snake that had yet to move, despite the commotion going on around it. It didn't make sense, but if the only movement was the slow forming of venom at the tip of one fang, she wasn't going to complain. After all, what harm was venom if the snake was immobile?

Unless...

Realization struck just as the venom dripped. It landed on Loki's shoulders, splattered down his back, made his determined growl immediately dissolve into something half-animal in its combined desperation and agony, and Jane was sprinting forward before she could question what she was doing.

His shout echoed in her ears in a completely different way than the antechamber, tugging at some deep, hidden part of her being that she didn't even know existed, drawing her through the maze of midnight coils unbidden. It was a strange feeling, to be spurred into action by something unknown, heedless of the danger.

But she didn't stop.

Couldn't have even if she'd wanted to, which she didn't.

And the fact that she didn't even consider stopping as she weaved around the snake's body was almost as baffling as the way she instinctively knew she was running to Loki for some reason that was more than just her needing him to get home.

It seemed like forever, but it couldn't have been more than a couple minutes before she was crossing the last stretch to where Loki was secured. His yelling had tapered off while she'd been running, and he now sagged against his bonds, head bowed, muttering incoherent phrases. Not until she stopped before him did he lift his head, vacant expression instantly sharpening.

"No."

Jane paused, surprised. She didn't know what kind of reception she'd been expecting, but that was
certainly not it. The intensity of his gaze was fixed on her. Nevertheless, she glanced back, searching for someone else, anyone the brusque no might have been meant for instead of her, but there was no one.

"No, no, no…" Jerking his head to one side, Loki yelled out. "Is this your newest torture, Skaði? When all else fails, is it the undead to which you turn? You may believe a draugr can do what your serpent cannot, but you will be left wanting."

"It's me, Loki." Ignoring his shouting, she cautiously stepped forward. "Jane, remember?"

"She speaks!" Loki turned so sharply that she stopped mid-step. "Of course you would. Tell me then, draugr, what torments you hold for me. With what devices will you attempt to break me?"

There was an unnatural brightness to his eyes, a sort of glazed look over the grey-green, and his face was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Jane studied the obvious signs. Clearly, she wasn't the only one that had contracted a fever during her captivity. It wasn't ideal, by any means – she preferred not to test what did and did not affect his ability to travel between realms – but more worrisome than the fever was the artwork of burns that decorated his body.

Identical to those she'd seen upon entering the chamber, the injuries could only have been caused by the snake's venom. But where the earlier ones had healed, these were fresh. And gruesome. And she wondered how they hadn't been the first things she'd noticed when approaching him because they seemed to be all she could look at now.

Loki's shoulders bore the brunt. The tunic was the most threadbare there, held together by the few strips of cloth that hadn't yet been dissolved by the venom, and the loss of even that thin bit of protection showed in the blackened mess that marred the otherwise smooth, pale skin.

Layers upon layers had been charred away, some sections eating deeper into the tissue than others. Inside the deepest holes, the meat was still faintly red. Everything else the venom had come into contact with was burned dark. There were even lines extending down his back and marks on his neck where the venom had splashed. Overall, the mottled appearance reminded Jane distinctly of a severe chemical burn.

"Skaði is quite proud of the creatures she pulls from the depths of Jötunheim. Her pets…” Loki's lip curled in a sneer. "Do you think the effects of their talents as beautiful as she?"

Stomach roiling, Jane pointedly avoided looking at his injuries again. Instead, she followed the length of the scaled body behind him, all the way to the head poised directly above them. The snake had been intimidating enough from across the room. Up close, it stirred a constant battle between her fight and flight instincts.

"There is nothing to fear, draugr. Not for you, at least."

Jane eyed the fangs, unconvinced. "Yeah, well, forgive me if I don't agree."

"The serpent is dead." To say the news came as a shock would be an understatement. It certainly looked alive. But when she refocused on Loki in surprise, his sneer lifted into a bitter smirk. "Not quite what you expected?"

"No, not really." Though, to be honest, she wasn't quite sure why she expected anything anymore. Beginning with Thor's crash landing, everything had changed.

"It matters not. Alive or dead, the creature's venom will flow freely until it is exhausted, and I…" Loki swallowed hard, head tipping back. "I can do nothing but wait. See, it forms even now."
Gazing up at the snake, Jane found the growing beads of venom on the tip of each fang and set her jaw resolutely. "Then we'd better get you out of here before it falls."

He couldn't very well take her home if he was seriously injured.

Or dead.

Jane spun in a circle, frantically scanning for something – anything – that might help. There were a few rocks. However, they were all as large, or larger, than her head, which would've made them somewhat unwieldy even if they'd had more to offer than rounded curves. There were bones, too, scattered around, but they were just as useless. Even the splintered edge of a femur wouldn't be sharp enough to slice through the tethers.

That was when she remembered Gerðr's offering.

Steel and leather pressed against her hip in a gentle reminder – when the time comes, you'll likely need this – and she ripped the dagger from her jeans. Hopefully, it was special. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt, and she tilted it slightly, watching the blade glint under the cold, blue light. It had to be special.

Readjusting her grip on the dagger, Jane reached out, but right before she grabbed hold of the chain, she paused. What she'd thought was a chain wasn’t a chain at all. It was thick and corded and… glistening. When the view through the triangular space between her hand, the column, and Loki's arm blurred into focus, she saw it: a pile of intestines spilling from a wicked gash in the snake's body.

Her stomach heaved as all the details fell into place. Now she understood why the serpent was dead. The frost giants had killed it, used its viscera as bonds and its still-flowing venom as a means of torment. What kind of people did that? Not people…

Frost giants.

Creatures.

Monsters.

But the clock was ticking. Every second not spent freeing Loki was a second wasted, time trickling down the drain, one moment closer to her escape being discovered and to the venom falling. So, gritting her teeth, Jane grabbed hold of the slippery entrails securing his left arm and raised the dagger.

"Stop."

It was the snarling quality of Loki’s voice more than the word itself that stopped her cold, and she stared at him, dumbfounded. "What?"

"I said…" Shadows slipped into his eyes like dark water, pupils dilated to the point there was only a faint ring of color encircling them. "Stop!"

"I'm trying to help you escape!" Their combined yells rebounded in the chamber, muddling with each other until the only recognizable thing was the incense behind the sound. "I will not leave you here to die."

However, his death would likely not come for a while. The wounds that had made her stomach turn were fading as skin, muscle, and sinew knit together. Before long, his flesh would be whole and unblemished, primed and ready for the next round of venom to fall from the snake. She had the
sneaking suspicion that not all Asgardians healed so rapidly and that the quick recovery was for the frost giants' benefit more than his. Obviously, there were worse things than death.

"Cease this charade. Unless…" Loki barked a bitter laugh. "Is this part of your game, draugr? Instilling the idea of hope when there is none?"

"Listen, I'm not a draugr, whatever that is." The dagger was still poised at the ready. She wasn't one of his subjects. She didn't have to obey his orders. It would only take a minute to bring the blade down and sever the entrails. "And I'm not here to hurt you."

"Lies!" Stretching the bonds to their limits, Loki strained towards her. "You think you can trick me? You ginnarr… óvinr… you fjándi born of Hel."

His vehemence would have made Jane take a step back if not for the fact that her attention had been snagged by the venom-tipped fangs overhead. The bead was twice as large as before, dangled precariously in the open air.

"You wear her like a mask. The voice is hers, but it is all a ruse. The hollowed core is filled with empty hope."

It was about to drip.

"Will you touch me to try and break me?"

It was about to fall.

"Will you kiss me like she did?"

Acting purely on impulse, Jane released both the viscera and the dagger, dove to the side to rummage through a heap of bones, and retrieved a broken skull nearly four times the size of her own. Loki's questions scratched at the back of her mind, but there were more important things at hand. She had to get back. She had to keep him from getting hurt again.

The weight of the skull had her staggering. Urgency, however, was a powerful motivator. And so it was with a growl issued through gritted teeth that she staggered the last few steps and hefted the skull over Loki just in time for the venom to land in the bowl-like cranium.

Pointed teeth pricked at one hand while the other struggled to hold the eye sockets. It was a precarious hold, at best – the entrails had left her hand slick – but she couldn't back down now. If she dropped the skull, the venom would coat them both, and having seen what it had done to Loki, she didn't want to consider what it might do to her.

"You…"

Jane bit her lip so hard that the warm, coppery taste of blood slid across her tongue. The skull was top-heavy enough to start with. The sloshing liquid it now contained only made it worse. Still, she risked a quick glance to Loki who was regarding her keenly, calculatingly.

"You are no draugr."

To fight an annoyed glare, she peeked around the skull to make sure there was no more venom dangling above their heads instead, but she couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "Glad you've decided to believe me."

Loki straightened. "Jane?"
"Finally." There was no sign of venom on the fangs anymore, which meant now was her chance to set the skull down and free Loki. "Now hold on while I—"

"Impossible. Too much time has passed." His face was a tumult of disbelief and thinly-veiled hope. "You should be dead."

"I was expecting a more pleasant greeting from someone who was willing to strike a bargain to save my life." With a grunt, she began to lower the skull, carefully bracing it against one shoulder while adjusting her grip. "Thank you for that, by the way. Though, I have to wonder if you really thought it through."

Chin lifted, jaw set, nose wrinkled in distaste… it was impressive how Loki managed to look so haughty given the circumstances. "I always consider the factors before making a decision."

Jane didn't doubt it one bit. Thor had said his brother was intelligent, that he was one of the few who could shed light on the inconsistencies between what she knew as galaxies and they called realms. On the rooftop that night in Puente Antiguo, she'd laughed it off when he'd come up short on his explanations only to pawn the specifics off on the supposed brother.

But that was before she'd met Loki.

It didn't take long to realize the type of person he was. Even bedraggled, half-clothed, and tortured, she could see the things that comprised him in a glance. Fortitude and cunning, aspiration and steadfastness, knowledge and power… yes, now she understood what Thor had meant.

Noxious smoke leaked out of the eye sockets and from between the teeth like a fog. It was accompanied by a faint sizzling sound, which could only mean the venom was slowly eating its way through the bone. Slightly dizzy from the odor, Jane lowered the skull and set it aside, carefully avoiding the bubbling venom it contained.

"I just meant there was no way I could've been sent back with the Bi-Frost destroyed. You had to have known that." She coughed the lingering smoke from her lungs. "Did you know what the frost giants had planned for me?"

"The agreement entailed transport in exchange for your life."

Frowning, she picked up the dagger and reached for the makeshift bonds. "That doesn't really answer my question."

"Having more questions than answers… an unfortunate consequence of being human, I'm afraid." If Loki was half as smart as she figured he was, he wouldn't antagonize her. At the very least, he'd wait until she'd freed him. He must have been aware of that, though, because when she pulled back to level him with a glare, he issued a long-suffering sigh. "I knew you would not be killed. That is all."

"That still doesn't make sense." The entrails squelched in her hand when she grasped them. "Since when does saving someone mean them being tossed in a dungeon?"

"Since when does life equate freedom? They are not one and the same."

It was a sound counterpoint, and she nodded – albeit grudgingly – as she readied the dagger. "Fair enough. Still, how would you know if the giants kept their word?" Her eyes flicked from the viscera to the snake, stressing his position. "Even if they'd killed me, there wasn't much you could've done about it."

"Honor can be found in many places, Jane… even amongst monsters."
There was an undercurrent to his voice that was hard to place, but then, she wasn't exactly dwelling on them, too consumed with how easily and cleanly the blade severed the entrails holding Loki's right arm.

The length still attached to the column flopped against the stones with a wet slap while the other piece dangled from Loki's wrist. He stared at it with a sort of morbid fascination, and as he rotated his wrist to stretch tendons and ligaments that had been stationary for far too long, Jane allowed his words to filter through.

Honor among monsters.

Believing that went against all her natural intuitions. Every interaction she'd had with the frost giants so far had been negative, from the twin attacks in Asgard to them locking her away in the dungeon. They'd even discussed eating her. No, not very honorable at all.

But at the same time, there was Gerðr. Gerðr who was not what she appeared, Gerðr who had risked her life to free Jane in exchange for a way back to her husband, Gerðr who was just as much a prisoner as Jane. And there was Loki, too. He'd obviously done something awful to warrant the frost giants' anger. Perhaps it had been bad enough to warrant the title of monster, but he'd also essentially sacrificed his life for hers.

"I never imagined you would remain in Jötunheim this long." Hair was caught in a patch of partially dried blood on his cheekbone, and only her hold on the dagger kept her from brushing it away. "I brought you here expecting the All-Father to retrieve you."

Confused, Jane's brows furrowed. "What?"

"He sees me." Loki cast a sneer to the domed ceiling. "The Gatekeeper sees me and you, the jötnar, the direness of our state and reports it to the All-Father who does nothing. The All-Father holds no love for those of Midgard, but I believed he would collect you if for no other reason than to appease Thor." If possible, his lip curled even more. "Instead, he leaves us to rot."

Something sifted through her blood at the mention of Thor, ultimately knotting uncomfortably in her stomach. Was he worried about her? Had he fought to get to her? Had he forgotten her? She wanted to hope for the best, but he was a god, a prince, the eventual ruler of an entire realm. She was merely human. Had he finally realized what she already knew? That there was no place for her in Asgard?

Shaking her head, Jane crossed to Loki's opposite side. Their eyes met momentarily in passing, but where hers quickly skipped to the other set of entrails, his remained on her, the weight of their focus as tangible as the clothes on her back and the dagger in her hand.

Warmth flooded her cheeks, and despite her best attempt to hide it, she suspected that he knew she was thinking of Thor. Erik had always said she had an impressive poker face when she put her mind to it, but something about Loki made her question that. Beneath his gaze, she felt laid open, stripped bare, completely and utterly vulnerable. It terrified her.

Without warning, Loki's breath hitched, and Jane sensed it before she saw it, the figure at her back that threw her into an icy shadow.

Then everything exploded into motion.

Before she could even think about reacting, Loki knocked her aside with his free arm. The blow forced the air from her lungs more than the impact with the floor, and she wheezed when she finally came to a stop. Sitting up in a daze, she dimly registered the stone-burn on her cheek from where
she'd slid across the ground.

It was a frost giant, of course. Anything else would've been too easy. Instead of escaping, they'd wasted time talking, and now it was too late. They'd been found out.

But as Jane watched the giant grapple with the half-bound Loki, something swelled within her – not courage or resilience or fearlessness; desperation, maybe? – and she didn't even hesitate, just ran to pick up the dagger that had fallen nearby, grasped the hilt with both hands, and buried it deep in the giant's back once, twice, three times.

Blood immediately spurted from the wounds, coating her hands like paint. Staggering backwards, she ducked the giant's outstretched claws when it whirled around, only pausing in her mad scramble when it fell first to one knee, then the other. A roar that trailed off into a gurgle echoed in her ears, but it was nowhere near as loud as her own racing heart. Or the resounding crash when the frost giant collapsed, dead.

Jane hadn't experienced a panic attack since waking up in Sweden. But now… now her chest was too tight and her lungs were too empty and her heart was beating too fast in her throat, which still might have been alright if her hands weren't covered in blood that was warm and wet and red, red, red. Everything was too much and, at the same time, not enough, and she wondered if it was possible to simultaneously struggle for air and drown in oxygen.

The adrenaline that had set her on fire was gone. It had burned through all that she was in an instant, using her and consuming her until there was nothing left but a brittle husk, only capable of repeating facts over and over to stave off the shock that threatened to pull her under.

"The renal arteries branch off from the abdominal aorta and supply blood to the kidneys."

"Jane."

"If one of the arteries is severed, the individual will experience extreme pain and blood loss with death occurring approximately thirty minutes after injury. If both are severed, death will occur significantly sooner."

"Jane."

"Stabbing in an upward motion beneath the ribcage provides the best chance of—" "Jane." She started, turning to Loki and his extended hand. "The dagger. Give me the dagger."

It was a surreal sort of feeling. Everything she'd recited were simple facts, but where introductory anatomy classes explained the location of the arteries, nothing explained how she knew the exact angle the dagger needed to be to reach them. Because it wasn't luck. There'd been too much intent behind the act for it to be mere luck.

Jane numbly stared at the blade still clenched in her fist, the crimson coating that matched her skin, the color that was so bright and out of place in the cobalt world. Then she lurched forward, skirting the fallen giant, and all but threw the dagger into Loki's waiting hand.

"Oh my god." She wiped her hands on her jeans, but there was still red in the creases of her palm and fingers. "Oh my god." And she didn't curse very often but… "Shit."

"Come on."

The red disappeared when Loki grabbed her hand. Some shades remained, though, in the pink-grey
loop of entrails dangling from his wrists. Jane watched the severed ends flick back and forth as Loki half-pulled, half-dragged her around the snake's body and across the antechamber to the only other exit. But that wasn't right… they should be sprinting towards gilded Asgardian architecture, not a looming archway and, beyond that, an ice-white blizzard.

"Where are we going?"

"Out of Munnr Død." Loki's grip was firm and relentless, cool where hers was clammy. "Away from Útgardar."

She assumed he meant their current location. "Great plan, but why are we running? Aren't you just going to magic us out of here?" At least, that had been her idea of how things would progress after setting him free.

"No." The closer they got to the exit, the lower the temperature dipped. "That would take more energy than I currently possess."

"Wait… what?" But then they turned the corner, and the brunt of the wind stole her breath, leaving her gasping. The dungeons were nothing compared to this. However, she fought through the cold, yanking Loki to a stop, forcing him to face her. Behind the partial wind-block of his body, she found her voice. "You're saying you can't get us out of Jötunheim?"

"I am able, just not yet."

It was a simple answer delivered in a surprisingly unassuming tone. How could he stand there and look so unaffected? How could he not be as upset as she was? The iron-hard bands of hyperventilation seized her lungs, and if not for their clasped hands, she might have fallen down or floated away or imploded in a dazzling display of confusion and panic.

Loki couldn't get her home.

He couldn't get her home.

"No, you don't understand, you have to take me back. There are people that are worried about me, that probably think I'm dead." When Loki turned to continue along the path, Jane stubbornly planted her feet in the snow. "I have to get home."

"Why?" He whirled on her with a snarl. "Because of Thor?"

Contrary to Loki's belief, her main objective was to return to Erik and Darcy – although the God of Thunder had crossed her mind as well – but she couldn't help but bristle at the derogatory way he said Thor's name. There was clearly something brewing behind the scenes between the two brothers.

"For your information—"

"If you think him your savior, you're sadly mistaken. You may hold his affection now, but it is a momentary infatuation." Loki yanked her forward, so close she could see her own reflection in his eyes. "In the end, you will be nothing more than one woman in a long line of women."

That might have been true, but it didn't stop her from meeting his anger with her own. "I wasn't going to call Thor my savior, so you can stop being a jerk."

"And if you truly desire to return to Midgard, you will cease any mention of Thor." Jane's mouth dutifully closed. "We are both stranded until my magic has been restored. Use your science to transport you home if you are so displeased."
"What will it take for the rest of it to come back?"

"Time. And rest." A portion of the ire leaked from his expression. "The most I can do is take us to the outlands of Jötunheim to hide while we wait."

As if on cue, a furious roar shattered the relative quiet from the chamber they'd been in, teeth-gratingly loud even above the blizzard wind. Her escape, Loki's escape, or the slaughtered frost giant must have been discovered. Or all three. Either way, they had to leave. If they were recaptured… well, she'd bet her life that the frost giants had something worse than dungeons in store for them.

"The outlands sound perfect. Let's go."

Jane had just begun to slip past Loki to resume their journey when his free arm found her waist. "There are easier ways." And in one smooth motion, he pulled her flat against his chest and the world disappeared into darkness.

The loss of breath and subsequent weight on her chest wasn't anything new. She'd felt that often enough in the past month – month and three days, if she wanted to include the ordeal in Puente Antiguo – to where it seemed almost normal. It was the slow tingle that raced across her skin when the black finally blurred into blue-white that preoccupied her more than anything.

The same sensation from first meeting Thor.

The same sensation from being healed in Asgard.

Loki's hands fell away when she jerked back, fingertips burning with the residual awareness of skin on skin where they'd slipped through the gaps in his tunic. Something stirred around her legs at the hasty movement, and she belatedly noticed the coat she now wore. Black with silver and green details… Jane glanced at Loki who arched an eyebrow in response.

A cacophony of questions swirled in her head before settling into something marginally safer. "Where are we?"

They stood on a plateau, the halfway point between a series of mountains to the left and rear and a sprawling valley of razor-sharp rocks to her right. Aside from those landmarks, there was nothing as far as she could see in any direction, nothing but the same blizzard that had raged at the frost giants' stronghold.

"The farthest I can manage." If she'd doubted Loki's word before, she didn't anymore. His shoulders were rounded, and his voice sounded unnaturally tight. "Söngr Fjøll."

Jane swiped the building snow from her eyelashes, wrapped the coat tightly around her body, and turned to Loki. "Alright, so what do we do now?"

"Now…" He nodded to a barely-there rock path that led up the mountainside. "We walk."

"This is where we're staying?" Jane crouched hesitantly in the narrow opening Loki had slipped through and peered inside. Moonlight painted a bright arch across the floor, the light throwing the depths into obscurity. "But it's a cave."
From the darkness came a callous chuckle. "You were expecting something more luxurious?"

"Well, I wasn't expecting the St. Regis, but—"

"Then I trust you won't object."

Jane's mouth snapped closed with an audible click, and heat warmed her cheeks at the suggestion that she was anything but grateful. What right did she have to complain? It might not be ideal, but it was certainly better than where they'd been or being stuck in the open. At least they were free. Mostly. Still, taking refuge in a cave was mild by comparison, given everything else she'd experienced.

"Feel free to come inside once you've had enough of the weather." Startled from her thoughts, she blinked to find Loki standing a few feet in front of her. "Or freeze to death out there, if you prefer. It matters little to me."

As if to emphasize his point, the wind picked up. It whipped at her hair, hardened the trace amounts of moisture at the corners of her eyes, slipped an icy hand down her back that instigated a shiver so violent her teeth chattered. Jane clenched her jaw. Even if she wanted to object, it seemed she didn't have much of a choice. And so, gathering the front of Loki's coat tightly in one hand, she grabbed a rock with the other and began to ease her way into the cave.

"Wise choice."

It was a short but steep descent to the bottom of the cave. Any other time, she would've jumped. Now, though, she wasn't sure her legs would hold up to the impact. So instead of the quick and easy method, she maneuvered her way down the slick rocks, seeking out footholds here, grasping for handholds there.

Loki stepped back to give her more room. A sidelong glance revealed his face to be expressionless, but it was a careful impassiveness, forced, the kind someone wore when trying just a little too hard. The devil was in the details, and there were too many to be mistaken. She could pick them out as easily as she could name the galaxies that had driven her research for years. The too-tight lines around his mouth, the shallow furrow between his brows, the muscle jutting on his jawbone… he was hiding something. She was sure of it. The question was what?

She was still wondering when her foot slipped and she fell away from the wall into open space.

It was a strange feeling, falling. The suddenness of it stole her breath, left her frozen and incapable of doing anything more than watch as the already small window of sky grew smaller still. Streaks of hair trailed above her. The strands looked almost weightless, cutting brown paths through the moonlight. If only gravity would allow the same for her.

But she didn't have to worry about gravity or the way her stomach remained at the entrance to the cave or how much it would hurt when she connected with the ground because her fall was broken before it could be completed.

It took a moment to register the arms that were looped beneath both her knees and her upper back. When she did, she slowly peeked up. They were captivating… Loki's eyes. Muted by the light that shaded his eye sockets, they were the color of a storm on the ocean, a turbulent swirl of cloud and wind and water, and Jane felt the draw of him in her very bones.

It was unexplainable.

It didn't make any sense.
But it was there all the same.

If he was a storm, all energy and crackling lightning and the heavy weight of thunder, then she was the wind and altitude-cool rain. Only together did they form a complete tempest. One did not exist without the other.

Jane struggled to breathe. No more than six inches separated their faces, which made her distinctly aware of every point of contact they shared. The arms around her, the soft press of fingertips to her thigh and ribs, the chest she was cradled against… she could feel the steady beat of his heart through her shoulder, a sharp contrast to her quick-fire one.

There was no rhyme or reason to her reaction. It was instinctive, completely beyond her control, but it was real. Very real. More real than anything she'd felt in as long as she could remember. And she would've thought the past month had finally caught up to her and driven her over the edge if not for the brief look that flashed through Loki's eyes as well, almost imperceptible, there-and-gone-again in its instantaneousness.

As suddenly as Jane had found herself in Loki's arms, she was out of them. Her body responded automatically to keep from crumpling to the floor, but her mind was slow to follow suit. She was sidetracked by the memory of his touch.

It shouldn't burn her skin like a brand.

It shouldn't fill her with a rush of excitement.

It shouldn't feel so… familiar.

Loki spun on his heel and retreated into the cave, leaving the clean scent of cedar in his wake. There was a hint of frost, too. But not the dirty, slushy smell of the dungeons. No, this was unadulterated and airy. It painted a vision of crisp mornings and winter-bright sunrises and grassy fields that had been dusted white.

"Lie down."

The electricity that had been coursing through her veins gradually filtered out as she focused on Loki. He was crouched on the floor with his back to her, busying himself with something she couldn't see. Without even a glance her way, he gestured to a relatively flat stretch of ground near the wall.

"You need to rest." The muscles visible through his tunic flexed, and something cracked beneath the pressure. "If not, you'll collapse within the hour."

Shifting her weight from foot to foot, Jane stared alternately between the cave opening, his hunched back, and the would-be bed. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"I was just a prisoner back there. You were the one… being…” She trailed off awkwardly.

_Tortured_ was such a severe word. Cruel, brutal, ruthless. It felt wrong to say it out loud, as if doing so would make it more real than it already was. Just because the physical signs had disappeared from his body didn't mean the image was gone. She rubbed her arms unconsciously. Would she ever forget the sight of him dangling helplessly between those columns? _Could_ she? _Could he?_

Loki found her eyes over his shoulder, one of his brows raised imperiously. "You believe me to be
"No."

"And because delicate was the last word she would've used to describe him – or any of the Asgardians she'd met, really – she repeated more firmly. "No. I just think you deserve the chance to rest more than I do."

Sleep was not what she wanted. She'd had plenty of time to sleep in the dungeons, too much time, and most of it had been filled with fevered dreams that clung to her even after she'd woken up. Now that she was free and had a clearer mind, she wasn't eager to see what new nightmares might plague her sleep.

"And what will you do if the jötnar come?"

"What will you do?" When Loki stood to face her, Jane met his gaze unflinchingly. "I may not be an Asgardian or a god or whatever you are, but I can still tell when someone's bad off. You're hurt more than you let on."

"That may be so."

He nodded in a conceding way that made her instantly suspicious, a feeling that was confirmed when he began to advance towards her. There was a predatory slowness to his movements. It belied the careful way he'd carried himself since their escape, made her forget all the injuries he'd sustained, had her shrinking back against the wall.

"The serpent may have taxed my strength…" She was trapped, sandwiched between two immovable forces. "And temporarily hampered the extents of my magic…" There was nothing she could do but meet eyes that had hardened into steel as he leaned in. "But I am not an invalid."

It happened in the span of a blink.

One second she was wavering beneath the dangerous glint in his eyes; the next, she was straightening. It was like something clicked, like someone had flipped a switch, and she knew… it was all bravado. Loki was dangerous, yes, but not to her. If so, he wouldn't have chosen her over himself at the edge of the Bi-Frost, would've have taken her with him from Munnr Død, wouldn't have saved her life.

"I didn't say you were an invalid." Strengthened by her resolve, Jane's eyes narrowed as she leaned forward, forcing him to pull back. "And I know you're not going to hurt me, so you can stop trying to intimidate me." She poked his chest for added emphasis. "It won't work."

For a moment, Jane wondered if she'd gone too far. Loki had retreated somewhat, increasing the distance between them from six inches to approximately eighteen, but he still held her gaze unwaveringly. Perhaps it wasn't the best idea, testing the limits of whatever it was that bound them together. But then he blinked and one corner of his mouth quirked and he breathed a sardonic ghost of a laugh and…

"Did it ever?"

And there it was again, the proof that they'd somehow known each other in the past, would know each other now if not for her lost memories. Her eyes clung to Loki as he moved to a pile of sticks that had no business being in the frozen wasteland of Jötunheim, much less in their cave. Then, with a flick of his fingers, the wood burst into flame.

Jane was a moth. Her feet carried her forward of their own accord until she was standing next to him, and as she drank in the warmth from the small fire he'd created, a sigh slipped from her mouth. Never
had heat felt so good or been so welcome.

Flattening her hands against the fire-warmed leather of the coat, she cast a sideways glance to Loki. He must have used some of the precious bits of his magic that remained to start the fire, and since he seemed relatively impervious to the cold, he could only have done it for her.

With a slight frown, she studied his profile. There were answers hidden in there somewhere… in the arching cheekbones and strong jaw, the regal tilt of his chin, the fathomless eyes that had an altogether different kind of warmth settling low in her belly when they slid to hers. There were answers, and she would have them.

The slight pressure of a hand on her lower back guided her to the smooth area he'd indicated earlier. "Sleep, Jane."

"But what if—"

"I will keep watch."

"But your strength—"

"Is wasted by participating in pointless discussions."

She wanted to argue, to contest and demand, to point out that it couldn't really be considered a discussion if he never let her finish a sentence, but she was suddenly so very tired. Exactly like Loki had said, everything was catching up to her. Her body was turning to mush. And the stone floor, hard as it was, was warm from the fire and felt better in that moment than the softest mattress in any of the realms.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, you know." Curling up on one side, cheek pillowed on her arm, Jane blinked sluggishly up at Loki. "Maybe not tomorrow or the next day… but one day."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. Other people might let little comments like yours slide..." She hid a yawn in the back of her hand. "Might not care about the why or the how, but I'm not one of them."

"No, you're not." His eyes shifted, roaming the expanse of her face. "You never were."

Then the cave and the fire and Loki dissolved into nothingness. She was lost in the dark, tumbling, free-falling down the rabbit hole again. Wonderland beckoned her with magic and giants and a slender, crooked finger that promised answers to questions she didn't even know, and she was powerless to stop it. All she could do was wonder…

How long would it be before she hit bottom?

How far would she fall before she forgot which way was up?

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – according to the stories in both the Prose and Poetic Edda, Loki was bound beneath a great snake in Jötunheim using the entrails of his children. Since the Loki of this story doesn't have children, the frost giants bound him
using the entrails of the snake. It’s relatively similar to the original tale; or close enough, at least. Also, Jane holding the skull over Loki to catch the venom is meant to be reminiscent of Sigyn, Loki’s wife from the stories.

Anyone seeing a pattern, here?

And while we’re on the subject of mythology…

Útgarðar – the location for the previous chapter; literally meaning outyards – supposedly surrounded a stronghold of the giants. Competitions were held in these outyards, so imagine it as a giant arena, beneath which are a labyrinth of dungeons. Kind of like the hypogeum that was beneath the Coliseum during gladiator games in ancient Rome.

The location of this chapter, however, is one of my own creation. The antechamber used specifically for the torture and killing of the frost giants’ most hated prisoners, Munnr Død means the mouth of death. Or it’s supposed to. Who knows with translation websites and Old Norse-to-English files. If you’re an expert, feel free to correct me! Same goes for the following translations:

Draugr – again-walker; essentially a ghost/apparition
Ginnarr – deceiver
Óvinr – enemy
Fjándi – demon
Söngr Fjöll – the singing mountains

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
2011: Söngr Fjøll, Jötunheim

Chapter Notes

This is it, guys. This is the first half of my two favorite chapters. I have been waiting for these since the beginning. I’m sure there will be others before the end of the story that I love, but nothing will come close to how I feel for these chapters. Even when things have gone tragically wrong and Jane’s memories are lost, they remain the same people they’ve been for centuries. I just can’t with these two immortals.

Music recommendation – “Sayuri’s Theme” from Memoirs of a Geisha is a great track for this chapter. I have even better ones, but they’ll be in the next update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Tell me your secrets, and ask me your questions – oh, let’s go back to the start.”

2011: Söngr Fjøll, Jötunheim

"Hot spring… ha!" Jane sullenly wrapped her arms across her chest and muttered through clenched teeth. "Hot spring, my ass."

Water lapped around her calves, steam rising in tendrils that curled around her body to create a misty fog. It was warmer than the air in the rest of the cave, which was already warmer than the air outside thanks to the continual fire Loki provided, but it was nowhere near warm enough to be considered a true hot spring. By her standards, at least.

Hidden in the back corner of the cave, the hot spring had been the first thing Loki mentioned after she'd woken up. It had come even before an offer for food and water. She hoped it was because he somehow knew how much the layer of grime covering her skin was bothering her. In all likeliness, it was probably just because he was disgusted by how badly she smelled.

"It is a hot spring." The ceiling domed above the pool of water, and his voice echoed in the space until she heard the same phrase repeatedly. "Were it not, you would already be on the verge of death."

"That's reassuring."

If Loki picked up on her sarcasm, he didn't comment on it, and an empty silence filled the cave. The only sound was that of light splashing against the rock walls as she disturbed the hot spring with her presence, edging down the slippery incline into it, water rising from calf to knee and knee to mid-thigh. Only when it reached her hips did she stop.
The fire in the background cast two larger-than-life shadows on the opposite wall, one hers, the other Loki's. After they'd finished eating, she'd left him by the fireside with strict orders not to peek while she bathed. A scowl tugged at the corners of her mouth. As much as she tried to forget, she could still hear the snorted laugh that was his response.

Jane fingered the hem of her shirt and cast a glance over her shoulder to make sure his back was still turned. It was. So, with a deep breath, she stripped off her shirt and bra, tossed them onto the pile of clothes already at the edge of the hot spring, and dunked beneath the water.

During the winter break of her junior year at Culver, she'd swum the length of the university pool in thirty degree weather on a dare. The first half of the swim had gone well enough. It was in the second half that she'd slowed considerably, despite her best efforts, and had seemingly lost the ability to do anything but gasp.

The hot spring was a lot like that.

Goosebumps immediately prickled her bare skin, and she was shivering violently even before reemerging. Bending her knees to stay below the surface just in case, she rubbed the grime from her arms and tried to control her breathing. Hot spring or not, the temperature was still freezing and borderline painful, but it was worth suffering through because the water itself felt heavenly. Cleanliness was a convenience she'd taken for granted.

"So…" Tipping her head back, Jane scrubbed at her scalp, turning just enough to see Loki from the corner of her eye. "Can I ask you something?"

"No."

Her foot slipped on the rock bed. Silence had its advantages, but after the dungeons, she'd had enough silence to last a lifetime and had assumed Loki might feel the same. Obviously, she'd been wrong. If his blunt rejection was an indicator of their future interactions, it was going to be a long… however many days until they went home.

Frowning, Jane turned. "What's wrong with you?"

"That, I believe…" The fire sparked when he poked at it. "Would be considered a question."

From the little time they'd spent together so far, she got the impression Loki wasn't a particularly forthcoming person. With trivial things, he might be, but not when it came to his secrets and the things that comprised the core of him. Still, he'd been talkative enough during their escape. Now, though… now he was deliberately stonewalling her.

Making sure to stay beneath the water, Jane eased close enough to the edge of the hot spring to grab her jeans and began washing them. "I've never met someone who was against answering questions of any kind."

"Then you have never met me."

"Are you sure about that?" Even partially hidden in the shadow of the fire, the tension that wended its way through his shoulders was unmistakable. "I didn't think so. People who have never met don't act or talk to each other the way we do, so I know there's something more going on. You don't have to worry, though, because I wasn't going to ask about that."

The sodden jeans plopped heavily when she tossed them back onto the stones, followed by her shirt, flannel jacket, underwear, and socks as she systematically worked her way through cleaning them.
"Look, all I'm trying to say is that this situation is bad enough already. Ignoring each other the entire
time we're stuck here will just make it all the more miserable."

With her clothes washed, Jane verified her privacy once again, quickly slipped out of the water, and
pulled on Loki's surcoat. It was too big, sleeves dangling well past the tips of her fingers and hem
dragging the ground, but it was dry. And warm. And all the extra material ensured she could keep
the front closed until her clothes had dried enough to redress.

Doubling the front edges across her chest and securing it with an arm pressed to her side, she picked
up the wet clothes and made her way back to the fire, dripping constantly. There, she laid out the
clothes to dry before sitting in front of the fire, catty-corner from Loki.

"How about this…" Jane held out her hands, soaking in the warmth. "If something comes up, we
talk about it. Normal stuff, you know? Like what the frost giants might be doing or the weather or
what we'll eat tomorrow. There's nothing inherently dangerous in that."

Hands warm, she leaned forward, unassumingly pulling her hair over her shoulder and running her
fingers through the strands to untangle the knots. Loki was staring resolutely into the fire, but the fact
that he hadn't shut her down so far was a good sign. Or so she thought. Perhaps he wasn't listening to
her at all.

"But…" When his eyes darted to hers, she fought the smile that threatened to creep across her face.
He had been listening. "You have to at least hear me out when it comes to questions. You don't have
to answer them, but if you do, I promise to answer any questions you might have for me in return."

"And what makes you believe I have any interest in a human?"

"Nothing in particular." Jane lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "Just trying to find a way to pass the
time."

The fire crackled, flames dancing playfully and throwing shadows across Loki’s face, burnishing his
normally grey-green eyes to silver. Despite the intensity, she held his gaze. It felt like a test of some
sort, which meant it probably was. He was the first to relent, though, eyes sliding away from hers
and to the fire.

"So…" Settling back against the wall, Jane stretched out her legs. It was worth a try. "How long was
I asleep?"

No blink, no slight muscle twitch… his torso didn't even move as he breathed. Loki might as well
have been a statue for as much as he reacted. Clearly, her proposal had been denied, although she
wasn't sure that she'd expected anything more in the first place. Jane had just given up and laid on
her side to either stare at the fire in uncomfortable silence or fall asleep, whichever came first,
when…

"Thirteen hours." There was a slight scrape as Loki shifted position. "Maybe fourteen."

One hand was pinned between her cheek and the ground, but Jane brought the other up to rest in
front of her mouth, casually masking the smile she couldn't contain. Progress, however small, was
still progress, especially with someone who was as much of an enigma as Loki. She'd take whatever
she could get.

It was a surprise to hear she'd slept for that long. The longest she could ever remember sleeping had
been ten hours, and even that had been attained only with the help of a long night of alcohol.
Exhaustion from her ordeal must have been weighing on her more heavily than she'd originally
"How did you escape the dungeons of Útgarðar?"

"A woman named Gerðr helped me." Jane's focus remained on the fire, like glancing at Loki would break the tenuous truce they'd established, but the grin was still in place, hidden in the curl of her fingers. "Made the ice bars on my cell disappear, told me where to find you, and gave me the dagger."

Progress, indeed.

The clothes weren't clean, per se, but they had to be better than they were.

They certainly couldn't be any worse.

Jane held up the shirt, eyed the rainbow of stains with a frown, and sniffed delicately before jerking away with a sharp exhale. Not being any worse was a far cry from the fresh out of the dryer with a hint of floral she was used to. In fact, it was much closer to survived in for a month and rinsed in ironically ice-cold hot spring water thinking that would be enough to get rid of the odor, which in all honesty, still smelled awful.

With no other feasible options, though, the choice was simple.

So, taking advantage of the few minutes she had alone while Loki stepped outside to do whatever it was he did out there, she shed the surcoat and redressed. She was pulling on her second sock when he returned, jumping from the cave entrance to the ground with a grace she wouldn't have been able to manage at the best of times, much less after a month of torture.

"We are safe." The question on the tip of her tongue was answered before she could even open her mouth. "The jötnar have taken their winter hounds and gone south."

"That's good."

Loki nodded. "The city that once towered at the edge of the frozen sea might have been destroyed by war, but plenty of dwellings that would make ideal hiding spots remain." Snow dusted his hair and clothes but melted quickly before the heat from the fire. "Searching there will take time."

Jane stood, stretched. "You mean there were actual homes we could have hid in?"

"In which we would have been more quickly discovered as well."

"Well, when you put it that way." It wasn't that she wasn't grateful, but what she wouldn't give for a mattress and pillows. Not that there would've been any of those in a deserted city anyway, of course. "Where will they go when they don't find us there?"

"Here, most likely." Loki dropped something white, furry, and roughly the size of a large dog on the opposite side of the fire before circling to stand before her. "To Söngr Fjøll."

In their haste to escape Munnr Død and her shock at killing the frost giant, Jane had forgotten all about the dagger. Thankfully, Loki had not. When they were both in the cave, it was by his side at all times. Only when they separated did he give it to her for protection. Now, knowing what he
wanted, she offered him the dagger.

"How long?"

"Four days, at most." Weapon in hand, Loki crouched before the animal. "They cannot afford to waste any more time than that."

Jane watched the blade slip beneath the creature's hide and carve a neat line from its groin to its throat. "And how long before your magic comes back?"

"Five, maybe six days."

If the force of gravity had suddenly tripled and yanked her to the ground, she wouldn't have felt heavier than she did right then. She hadn't moved an inch – she was still watching Loki skillfully skin the animal – but her arms and legs felt leaden, her stomach residing somewhere around her feet.

There wasn't enough time. Unless something miraculous happened, the frost giants would be scouring the mountains for them long before they could make the journey home. So where did that leave them? Meeting the group head on – in which they'd probably die in battle – or wandering the mountains to stay one step ahead of the hunt – in which they'd probably die from exposure?

"Figures..." Jane raked a hand through her hair. "That would be our luck."

"I don't believe in luck." Setting the dagger aside, he grabbed a loose end of the hide in one hand, braced the other against the already-skinned section, and pulled. "We have done well thus far, all things considered."

"But that's not going to help us in four days."

"No." Loki sliced away the last few connecting pieces and tossed the pelt behind him. "It won't."

The implication of an upcoming meal was distracting, but not enough to keep her from frowning at the silence that stretched out. "If you have a plan in place, feel free to reassure me with it at any time. It's not like there's anyone around to hear you be nice, so it won't damage your reputation."

Aside from a fleeting hard look, Loki ignored the taunt, burying the dagger in the animal's chest with a gut-wrenching thump. "For the time being, the plan is simply to survive. We'll decide a future course of action if the jötnar come to the mountains."

It wasn't much of a plan.

And yet, it was all that really mattered.

They wouldn't be able to worry about the frost giants finding them if they were already dead, so there was little use in traipsing around Jötunheim looking for another place to hide out when they didn't even know if they needed to leave in the first place. Loki was right. Staying put was the best option for now.

Crimson slashed a vivid streak through Jane's sight, and she blinked to see a pool of blood and other fluids beneath the freshly gutted animal. The temperature was already working to congeal the liquids faster than normal, but it still grew in an ever-widening circle towards her boots. Nose wrinkling in distaste, she stepped back.

"Couldn't you have done that outside?"
"Yes, if you want the jötnar's hounds to catch on to us." Loki tossed a handful of organs onto the pelt. "They are well attuned to the scent of blood."

"It's just that this is where we sit and sleep, and now it's all..." She gestured to the mess. "But I guess it wouldn't be so bad if you'd use some of your magic to get rid of it."

The lungs, heart, and liver joined the rest of the pile with a wet sound.

"Loki?"

What remained of the animal was methodically quartered.

"That is what you're going to do, right?"

Then it was cubed into even smaller chunks.

"Loki, are you even listening to me?"

With an aggravated sigh, he braced his forearms on his thighs and looked up to her. "The more I utilize that which has been restored, the longer the rest will take to return. I am testing the limits as it is. Though, if you do not mind prolonging our stay, I will make the entire cave spotless. Is that what you wish? No? Then there are some inconveniences you will simply have to suffer."

Pride had her scowling at the reprimand, clenching her fists, trying to hold his irritated gaze with one of her own, but common sense won out in the end. They were both going through the same hardship, which made it wrong of her to expect anything more than what he was already doing. Flushing with a strange combination of anger and embarrassment, her eyes fell to a blank stretch of stone between them.

"Now if you are finished complaining, you can be of some use. There is a hole outside the cave." Loki pointed the dagger to the mound of entrails. "Take the remains and discard them there. I will bury them when you are finished. But leave the hide beside the hole. We can use it as a covering."

A lingering trace of pride swelled, and for one long moment, Jane considered refusing. Then she thought about the likely permanent wedge doing so would drive between them and, considering they were stuck together in the cave with only each other for company, how unpleasant that would make things. So it was with a deep, humbling breath that she strode forward, grabbed the edge of the hide, and began to drag it towards the cave entrance.

Ultimately, it could've been worse. The hot spring wouldn't quite remove the feeling of the skin-slick side of the pelt from her hands, but at least she'd been able to avoid touching the innards for the most part by wrapping them within the hide. And the frigid outside air had done wonders to quell her roiling stomach.

Back in the cave, Jane skirted the now dark, wine-red bloodstains and sat opposite of Loki, discreetly glancing at him through her lashes. He didn't even look at her. Resigned, she brought her knees to her chest, rested her chin on them, and wrapped her arms around her shins, observing his movements even as he disregarded hers.

"I thought you were trying to avoid using magic."

She hadn't really anticipated a response of any kind, but when his eyes lifted, she nodded pointedly to the steel rod in his hand. It hadn't been in the cave before she'd gone outside. She was sure of that. But now there it was, holding the speared chunks of meat above the flames.
"Admittedly, it has been many years since I last visited Midgard..." Pulling the rod back, Loki inspected the meat before extending it to her. "But I seem to recall humans preferring their food cooked."

Jane's mind went blank. It was like she'd touched a live wire that had fried all other thoughts and left her functioning on autopilot. She gingerly slid a couple pieces of meat off the makeshift skewer, but they lay cradled in her palm, forgotten, as she stared attentively at Loki who chose a portion for himself, trying to make sense of things.

How could someone prepared to kill a sibling also be willing to sacrifice himself for her?

How could someone with such apparent bitterness towards the human race be so aware of what she needed?

How could someone strive to keep her at arm's length even as he rescued her from Útgarðar and Munnr Død, gave her his surcoat to stay warm, started the fire and kept it going despite the strain on his magic, made sure she was rested and fed?

Details settled around her like a puzzle, a shredded picture that she couldn't quite reconstruct. Son and brother, prince and god... but also self-serving, a murderer, an outcast... yet brave, willful, and conscientious. Each piece told a story of its own, but until all the sections were notched back into place, there was no way of seeing the bigger picture. Even then, something was missing. But maybe that was his intention all along, secreting away certain aspects so the entire truth would never be revealed and he could maintain his mysterious and complex persona.

Or maybe it wasn't anything so complicated as that.

Maybe it was simply because he didn't know who he was himself.

Jane nibbled at a now lukewarm chunk of meat, attention fixed on Loki. Who was this person, this god, this man? Better yet... who was he to her? And before she could even comprehend thinking them, words tumbled from her mouth.

"I'm sorry."

Loki's gaze snapped to hers. There was no trace of surprise, no furrowed brow or wide eyes or slack jaw, just a quiet response on the heels of an almost imperceptible dip of his chin. "As am I."

"What do you have to be sorry for?" He might come across a little brusque at times, but that didn't change the fact that she was only alive because of him. "I was the one acting like a brat."

Lifting the steel rod, Loki watched its slow progression as he spun it between his fingers. "How old are you, Jane?"

What age had to do with their current topic, Jane had no idea, but she decided to humor him. "Thirty-eight." Or that was what she believed. With no records of any kind, the hospital had been forced to use their best judgment, and twenty-eight had been the final verdict from one of the specialists.

"I am nearly two thousand." He continued the slow twirl of the skewer. "In that time, I have committed a great many acts you would consider heinous. Most were done in the name of the Realm Eternal and, by extension, the All-Father. A few were in pursuit of my own conquests. There are many that would say I should feel remorse for all of them."

Sensing the open-endedness to the statement, Jane cocked her head to one side. "But?"
"But…" The rod's progress came to an abrupt stop as Loki's eyes shifted. "There is only one act I truly regret."

For a split-second, Jane thought about inquiring further, but deep down, she knew it would be pointless. Admission was his only objective, not the details or the specifics. It was for her, though. Call it instinct or a gut feeling or simple intuition, but she could sense it in the air like a tangible thing, feel it in his eyes that seemed to burn straight to her core.

Loki's apology was meant for her.

"What did you say this place was called?"

Kneeling at the entrance to the cave, Jane cupped her hands over her mouth to trap the warm exhales and scanned the mountainside. It was the first opportunity she'd had in days to see more than three feet in front of her, the blizzard that had raged since their arrival having finally waned, so she wasn't about to waste it, cold or not.

The path they'd taken to reach the cave curled around the mountain to her right, eventually winding to the same plateau where they'd arrived. Beyond that, the land descended in a shallow decline before dropping off completely in a steep cliff. Distance obscured what lay at the bottom of the drop-off, but Jane knew what it was. A virtually impassable valley studded with jagged rocks.

"Söngr Fjøll." The fire crackled merrily behind her when Loki arranged another log on top of it. "The singing mountains."

Jane rotated carefully. Snow still dappled the air, but it was thin and interspersed and only seemed to enhance the mountain that veered sharply upward to her left, ending in a peak some two hundred feet above her head. There were others too. She could see at least four in the direct vicinity with shadows of more in the distance, every single one of them towering so high they might pierce the blue-grey sky.

The singing mountains.

A pretty name for such a desolate place.

Head falling back against the rocks, Jane stared at the sliver of a moon. Its cold light was dim, but that was all it took to turn the snow-covered mountainsides to diamonds. If she hadn't been preoccupied, she might have called it beautiful. As it was, though, the firmament and the stars that hung there had her full attention.

Ursa Major. That particular stretch of the universe had been the center of her studies since the first anomaly she'd recorded. She knew everything about it, from the galaxies that constituted its most prominent points to the obscure ones that resided within its scope in deep space. She even knew its history, that before it was known as the Great Bear, the Vikings had deemed it Odin's Wain.

But there was no Ursa Major in Jötunheim.

Not as she knew it, at least.

There were similarities in the design – four stars extended up and out in a crooked tail; five stars
formed the bear's head – but there were differences as well. The distorted constellation was in a completely wrong quadrant, like the universe had been picked up and spun on its end. And that didn't even get into the new astral bodies within the arrangement she didn't recognize.

Jane's sigh fogged momentarily in the air before the wind yanked it away, drawing it up, up, up into the mountain passes.

Had Thor been right that evening in Puente Antiguo? Ten years of researching anomalies and Einstein-Rosen bridges trying to find the connection between the two had made it hard for her to accept something so drastically different as what he'd claimed, but now… now she was forced to reevaluate everything she thought she knew.

Closing her eyes, Jane envisioned the drawing in her notebook. She could see the rough sketch she'd done of the galaxies that had given off signals over the past decade. She could also see Thor's addition, the sloping lines of Yggdrasil that connected all the spheres into the branches of the World's Tree.

Thor had called them realms.

She had called them galaxies.

Was it possible they were one and the same?

Even more, was it possible she was now in one of those distant galaxies looking out at an Ursa Major that seemed familiar because it was the same constellation but different because she was judging it from a new perspective, that one of the new galaxies in its makeup was the Milky Way?

Jane pressed the heels of her hands against her closed eyes until she saw starbursts of color in the darkness. All of her experiences should've given her answers. Instead, they'd only given her… not more questions, really, just different ones. And a headache. What she wouldn't give for a quality telescope and her notebook.

A soft ringing interrupted her thoughts without warning.

Lowering her hands, she blinked away the spots until Jötunheim sharpened into view. There was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to explain the new sound, but it was there all the same. It was quiet at first, like she was hearing the resonation of bells chiming in the distance. However, the longer she listened, the louder it got.

"Klagesang av vinteren."

Something nagged at the back of Jane's mind, masked behind the wall separating the past ten years from the time before. It was annoyingly persistent, an itch she couldn't scratch, unexplainable in the same way she could speak multiple languages fluently without second thought, and it clawed its way to the surface unbidden.

"Winter's lament." But rather than getting hung up on the fact she could add Norwegian to the ever-growing list of languages – or that she knew it was Norwegian at all – Jane looked from Loki to the peaks and back again. "Is that why they're called the singing mountains?"

"Yes." She would've thought him asleep if he hadn't been talking. With his head back, eyes closed, and forearms resting on his bent knees, he was the image of relaxation. "Rock gives way to crystal close to the mountaintop, so when the wind blows just right and cuts through the crags, it creates a song."
Jane cast one more fleeting glance to the peaks before sliding back into the cave.

There had to be some explanation for the event. She'd once watched a woman play a set of wine glasses half-filled with water like an instrument, her damp fingers gliding over the rims until it made a song. Maybe Söngr Fjøll was similar to that, the perfect combination of temperature, humidity, and wind direction resonating across the crystal mountains.

It was an interesting idea, but there was no way to prove it. Even if she'd wanted to, she wasn't about to trek up the mountainside to dissect the phenomena into scientific principles and explanations. So, emptying her mind of everything but the surprisingly calming mountain song, she sunk to the ground beside Loki.

And if she accidentally misjudged the distance and ended up so close their shoulders were touching, neither of them commented on it.

Or moved away.

Picking absentmindedly at the too-long sleeves of the surcoat, Jane's attention drifted from the supple leather to her crossed legs to the dark entrance of the cave to the fire beside her to the stone ceiling and back, again and again and again… anything to avoid looking at Loki who was sitting cross-legged in front of her.

They couldn't have been there for more than a couple minutes, but she was already feeling fidgety. First, she'd bounced her knee. When that had earned her a sharp look, she'd switched to fingering the flawless stitching on the surcoat. It wasn't enough to burn off her restless energy, though, so when a rumbling crash sounded outside the cave, she jumped involuntarily.

"It is merely an avalanche." Loki leaned closer, the fingers holding her chin tightening almost imperceptibly. "Hold still."

"Yeah, it's just an avalanche. No big deal."

An avalanche was no laughing matter – they could easily be buried alive in their cave – but a half-grin quirked the corner of Jane's mouth nevertheless. Loki's perpetual blasé attitude, like there was nothing in the world worth worrying about, had a naturally soothing effect on her. Confidence was contagious. And welcome, especially when there were so many things they should be worrying about.

The grin smoothed away as she listened to the crashing outside. "You still haven't told me what you're doing."

It had all happened so fast.

One minute she'd been washing her face in the hot spring; the next, Loki had grabbed her arm, forced her to sit near the fire before him, and grabbed hold of her chin. Withdrawal was a knee-jerk reaction, but her attempt had failed spectacularly. Loss of magic apparently did not mean loss of strength. So with no way of getting away, Jane had resigned herself to being well and truly caught.

For what reason, though… well, that was the question.
Loki turned her head to the side. "You fail to give me a reason why I should be obligated to do so."

"How about because you've been touching my face for the past five minutes, inspecting me like I'm some kind of horse for sale, and it's starting to get a bit unnerving." With an exaggerated sigh, she finally gave into the urge to look at him. "Is that good enough?"

"I am fixing you." He deliberately avoided her gaze, focused instead on her cheek.

"You make it sound like I'm broken."

Shifting her head some more, he turned it to where she couldn't see him even in her peripheral vision anymore. "Perhaps you are."

"Very funny."

Jane scanned the wall, sending it the unamused look meant for Loki as she listened to the last traces of the avalanche fade outside. The mountains groaned and shuddered beneath the pressure. It might have been a combination of ice and rock and snow, but it sounded like steel on steel, grating to the point it set her teeth on edge.

However, she didn't even realize her jaw was clenched until another set of fingers traced a slow path along the jutting muscle at the edge of her cheek. And when a single fingertip pressed to the partially healed scrape that marred her cheek from where she'd slid across the floor in Munnr Død, her breath caught in her throat, not at the touch itself but the sensation that bled from the point of contact.

It wasn't blatant or overly palpable. No, it was far more subtle than that. Even still, her skin was alight, nerves jolting with liquid electricity that twined and raced with the blood in her veins, and Jane gasped, her hand coming up to grasp the one at her cheek of its own accord as her eyes found Loki's, wide, staring.

"Can everyone feel that?" Inside the curl of her hand, his fingers twitched. "It was there when I first met Thor and when the healer in Asgard crushed up that stone and when you brought us out here and… it's magic, right? That's what I'm feeling?"

Loki pulled his hand free and pushed hers down to join the other in her lap. "Yes."

"Yes? That's all I get?"

"Yes, you are detecting magic." The sensation returned when he pressed his finger to her cheek again.

The initial electricity had faded into a dull tingle, but it was still identifiable, pleasantly warm as it spread down her neck to her torso and arms, all the way the tips of her toes. Occasionally, a spot would tingle more than the rest – her cheek, a patch on her ribs, her upper arm, the outside of her left thigh – and when her thumb did the same, she looked down to see the broken fingernail regrow before her eyes.

And something equally warm settled in her stomach at the realization that Loki was healing her wounds.

He'd outright refused to get rid of the mess the creatures that became their meals left in the cave by way of magic, but here he was using it on her. And on trivial injuries, at that. Sure, they were a nuisance – she'd woken more than once with her cheek stinging from the rocks scraping at the scab while she slept, and the frostbitten ring of skin on her arm was disturbing – but they certainly weren't posing any real threat to her life.
So why was he wasting it on her?

"You're…" Jane swallowed the sudden lump that had lodged itself in her throat. "You're supposed to be saving your magic."

Silence. That was the only response she received. Silence and the whistling wind that didn't sound nearly as loud as usual in the wake of the avalanche. The tingling transferred down her leg to center on her ankle, and accepting that her comment would be disregarded, she backtracked.

"How is it that I can feel it?"

Their eyes briefly connected before his fell away again. "A better question would be why you are so unaffected by the existence of magic when you come from a realm where there is none."

"I don't think it's necessarily that I believe in magic." Jane's brows knitted in thought. "I just don't have a way to scientifically explain it all yet."

"You and your science."

"See, there it is again." The healing process apparently complete, Loki lowered his hand. He didn't move away from her, though, just met her keen gaze with his own impassive one. "It's been the proverbial elephant in the room since you first said my name in Asgard, and you know as well as I do that we can't dance around the issue forever. So why don't we go ahead and tackle it now?"

"Don't ask it."

"How do you know about science?"

"Jane…"

"How do you know about me?"

In a blur of black and green, Loki stood and began to stalk towards the cave's entrance. However, with the subject finally breached, Jane had no intention of letting it go now. She stumbled after him as fast as possible, grabbed his arm, and swung around in front of him. It was the only way to make him stop. It was the only way to force the confrontation.

Maintaining her hold, Jane edged in. "How do we know each other?"

Loki's eyes flicked meaningfully down to the hand on his arm, then back to hers. "Most of those who deign to touch me in such a way are left without a hand to withdraw."

"Well, I guess it's a good thing I'm not like everyone else."

One of his eyebrows arched in a challenge. "What makes you believe you're not?"

"You!" Jane released his arm, throwing her hands up in frustration. "And everything you say and do." With something between a growl and a groan, she raked a hand through her hair. "You might think you're being secretive and mysterious, but you're not fooling me."

"I am the God of Lies, Jane."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't mean I can't see through your little act." Her voice was raised now, rebounding in the confines of the cave. "You can't seem to make up your mind whether you don't care about me at all or you care too god damn much."
It was the wrong thing to say. Jane knew it immediately from the stony expression that clicked into place like a shield over Loki's features. But at the same time, she couldn't find it in herself to care. They'd been circling the issue, the truth, each other since the moment they'd locked eyes on the shattered edge of the Bi-Frost, and enough was enough. They could dance around one another for only so long before the music stopped.

But the words were too much, and her fear was that they wouldn't cause a fallout so much as the metaphorical equivalent of setting fire to a forest.

She could visualize it… the halting, hint of a companionship they'd established consumed in the inferno, the connection they shared going up in flames. They'd be back at square one, only this time there would be no getting past the awkward silence they'd circumvented the first go-round. It was funny, in an ironic sort of way, how relationships took so much time to develop but only seconds to destroy.

Frustrated by her own rash tendencies as much as Loki's aloofness, Jane shoved past him and collapsed next to the low-burning fire. Let him leave. It wasn't like she'd really stopped him from doing so in the first place, but now there wasn't even the pretense of anything holding him back. There was no reason for him to stay when she'd effectively ruined everything.

Which was why something important flat-lined in Jane's brain when he didn't leave at all but came up to sit beside her instead.

"I cannot give you the truth, Jane. It would be too much." He was so close that the hairsbreadth of space separating their arms would disappear if either of them all but breathed too deeply. "Trust me when I say some things are better left forgotten."

"Easy to say when you're the one who remembers everything." With a disparaging laugh, she ran a hand down her face. "I feel it all the time. Like some kind of animal clawing at the back of my brain, always pulling at my attention but hiding whenever I try to focus, constantly teasing."

A stray piece of bark that had fallen off a log before it had been sacrificed to the fire rested a few inches in front of her foot. Picking it up, she rolled it between her fingers for a second, then flicked it dispassionately into the flames, watched it transition from brown to red-orange to coal.

"I just want to know who I am."

"You are the same person you've always been." A sideways glance revealed Loki to be already staring at her. "You have not changed from the Jane Foster you were in the beginning."

In the beginning. With a sigh, Jane brought her knees up and rested her cheek on them, focusing on some indistinct point in the cave past Loki. The beginning of what? She wanted to remember everything. Really, she did. But if she were being completely honest, the idea was equally frightening.

It had always been a point of concern that no one had ever come for her after the accident. No friends, no family, nothing. Just as curious had been her unexplainable familiarity with cultures and languages and historical events. Now she was faced with the fact that she’d known, or at least been acquainted with, a Nordic god from another realm.

What, exactly, did her past hold?

Maybe Loki was right. Maybe she was better off not knowing.

"So where does that leave us? Because you can't lie or pretend we don't know each other anymore."
When Loki's lips tightened into a thin line, Jane snorted. "Let me guess... you're not going to answer that one." She nodded sagely, mouth quirked in a half-smile. "Figures. Are you done answering questions altogether?"

"No."

A curt reply but a reply nonetheless, and suddenly desperate to change the subject, Jane grasped at the first thing to cross her mind.

"Alright then, why did Skaði kill the snake?" Loki's brows pulled together briefly in question, so she clarified. "You said she was proud of them, that they were like her pets. If that's true, why would she kill them?"

It wasn't something she'd consciously wondered. There were plenty of other things to occupy her thoughts, most of them significantly more important than discovering the reasoning behind a frost giant's actions. But now that she'd voiced it, she needed to know.

"Because that is what monsters do." Loki fixed her with a thousand-yard stare as if he could see right through her, right into her soul. "They destroy the things they care for most."

Then, with a whirl similar to earlier, he stood and turned away. There was no underlying sense of avoidance in his motions this time, though, just the heavy, borderline desperate need to be alone. Heart aching with something she couldn't put words to or even begin to explain, Jane watched Loki cross the cave, only remembering their agreement and finding her voice when his lean frame became a shadow in the entrance.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Will you come back?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't ask a question."

"I know."

And then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Not a whole lot of other things going on in this chapter aside from Jane and Loki, but that's alright because they deserve some downtime together. The only item of note would be the mountains themselves. When Loki explains how the wind blows just right and cuts through the crags, it's a tie-in to the scene at the end of 2001: Sweden – Part II when Jane is suffering from head trauma and forgets her memories. Go back and read through that last section and see if you catch the reference!

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
And now for the second part of my favorite two chapters! I love this one even more than the last. Also, I mentioned to a few of you in the review responses, but I’ll say it here so everyone can prepare themselves – Jane’s memories will be making a full return in the next chapter. There. Now go be excited!

Music recommendations – “Central Park” from the King Kong soundtrack is a great listen for the lighter sections of this chapter, but the real gem that I’ve been waiting to tell everyone about is “The Vote” from The Village soundtrack. It’s essentially the theme for Jane and Loki’s relationship throughout the second and third arcs of this story. If you never listen to anything else, please listen to that one. It’s perfect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“How carelessly God hummed us whole with such pronounced holes for lungs. How hollow we are.”

Laid out on her stomach with her chin propped in one hand, Jane used the sooty end of a stick to chart a miniature version of the diagram that had been in her notebook. NGC 3079 and I Zwicky 18, the Milky Way and Messier 81… one by one, the galaxies took form on the smooth section of rock beside the fire until the drawing was complete.

"Do you know how long we've been here?"

"Two and a half days." The thick, wet sound of their dinner being gutted stopped for a moment. "Possibly closer to three by now."

Jane tilted her head, simultaneously bringing the diagram into better view so she could examine its accuracy while keeping Loki out of sight. Hearing him eviscerate the animal was enough. She didn't need to see it too. Though, it didn't bother her nearly so much anymore. Close scrapes with death and starvation had a way of shuffling around one's priorities.

"Not here here…” She tapped the stick against the cave floor then waved it overhead, gesturing vaguely behind her. "Jötunheim here."

"Keeping track of the passing days was not one of my main concerns in Munnr Død."
Ignoring his remark, Jane's brow wrinkled in concentration. "I was thinking we'd been here about a month." Then she scuffed away the spot that was M101 and redrew it further down. "What do you think?"

Something plopped with a disgusting squelch near her feet. "I think you need more to do if you have enough time to fixate on this issue."

"We're playing a waiting game here, Loki. All we have is time."

Long stretches of time occasionally interspersed with baths, cooking and eating, sleeping, venturing outside for bathroom breaks, and in Loki's case, hunting and scouting. If not for his more vigorous activities, she'd've thought they'd regressed to being children again, although thankfully, neither of them acted like children. Well, most of the time.

Jane tilted her head, hand shifting to press to her temple, and focused on darkening the galaxies even more. One month. Could they really have been in Jötunheim that long? All those days and nights spent in the dungeons ran together, sleeps and awakes blurring like a watercolor painting, so one month was definitely possible. But if that was true…

A tingling sensation settled under the bridge of her nose, burned at the back of her eyes. Between her own resolve and Loki's help, she'd managed well enough in the frozen realm, but that said nothing for the people that had been left behind. Erik, Darcy, Thor… if she'd really been gone for a month, that would be thirty days without any sign whatsoever from any of them.

Were they searching for her? Had they ever searched for her?

The metal rod appeared before Jane without warning, chunks of skewered browned meat still sizzling from the fire. She blinked and watched a drop of grease fall to mar the diagram between NGC 3310 and NGC 3079, then turned to Loki who was staring at her, one brow raised knowingly.

"Stop fixating."

"I can't help it." Jane mirrored his expression but dutifully removed a piece, rolling to the side so she could sit up and eat. "I just keep wondering if everyone thinks I'm dead… if they've given up."

"What will you do if they have?"

One shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "Nothing, I guess. There's nothing I can do."

From what Loki had described the other day, travel between the realms was virtually nonexistent with the Bi-Frost destroyed, limited only to those with an aptitude for magic that could find the seams of space. Loki had that power. Apparently, so did the All-Father. But considering they were still sitting in a remote cave having a one-sided discussion on how long they'd been stranded, no help would come from that direction.

If only she had access to her research. She wasn't yet sold on the idea that magic was something separate from science and was almost positive she could figure out a connection between the two. Not on Jötunheim, though. No research, no machines. Unless someone else figured out how to pull her back to Earth, she was out of luck, her only means of escape entirely in Loki's hands.

"One month, at least." Startled from her thoughts, Jane's eyes snapped to the figure partially hidden behind the fire. Loki wasn't returning her gaze, though, just staring intently into the flames. "That is how long we've been in Jötunheim. Though it feels considerably longer."
"Yeah…" The swallow was thick in her throat. "It does."

Jane watched Loki's thumb rub a repeated pattern over the inside of his wrist where he'd been bound and mulled over icy dungeons and skeletons, plates of raw meat and gutted animals, serpents that dripped poison even in death and frost giants that hunted by the scent of blood, and as she absently traced lines around the galaxies with her fingertip to form an invisible World's Tree, she decided that she'd never felt more homesick in her life.

And how funny – or maybe it was just ironic – that she didn't even know where home was.

Home is where the heart is, that was how the saying went. But where was her heart? A piece of it was back on Earth, nestled snuggly between Erik, Darcy, and her research. A smaller piece had splintered off in Asgard, not because of affection for Thor so much as simply the thrill of being in another realm. The rest, though… the rest was tucked neatly behind the impenetrable wall of her past. Just like everything else.

Shaking away the line of thought before it set in too deeply, Jane's mind wandered back to Erik, Darcy, and Thor. The idea of them trying to find her was comforting, but she wasn't naïve enough to put too much hope there. A month was a month, and thirty days was a long time to be gone. So instead, she imagined what they would normally be doing.

Thor was the hardest, Jane knowing next to nothing about him. If she had to guess, though, he would be doing his princely duties putting things back into order after the mess Loki and the frost giants had made in Asgard.

Erik was the easiest. She could picture him plain as day: nose-deep in a pile of research materials with a cup of forgotten, lukewarm coffee nearby and chalk dust streaked across his cheek from scribbling theories on the blackboard.

Darcy, on the other hand, was a little more hit-and-miss, but only because she was notoriously hard to predict. She might be out for dinner with friends or curled up on the couch watching reruns of I Love Lucy, buying alcohol for a party or working on the paper that would be due at the end of her internship. Or, considering it had been late November when Thor had crashed into their lives and Jane had been gone for over a month now, maybe Darcy was simply finding the nearest guy to pull in for a kiss to ring in the New Year.

"Hey, Loki?"

"Hmm?"

With a wistful smile, Jane let her head fall back against the wall and closed her eyes. "Happy New Year."

"It's kind of unnerving, you know? The most I've ever done with a knife is chop vegetables or butter toast. There was one time we had to dissect a pig fetus in Intro to Biology, but that doesn't explain how…"

The words wedged somewhere between Jane's lungs and her mouth. It was probably best if she didn't say it. Not saying it helped make it less real. Water splashed in the background, and with her eyes carefully averted from the hot spring where Loki was currently bathing, she idly spun the
"How you were able to dispatch the jötun so efficiently?"

Jane gave the slowly revolving blade a deadpan look. She'd been right. Just hearing what had happened spoken out loud made her uncomfortable. It sounded even worse when Loki said it so brazenly.

A flick of her finger sent the dagger spinning faster again. "Something like that."

"Evidently, you were taught to wield one at some point." Small waves splashed against the walls, then a couple wet footsteps accented by a constant dripping on the rocks as Loki exited the pool. "Or you were lucky."

"I thought you didn't believe in luck."

"I don't." Which meant her having some deep-seated knowledge of knives and how to use them was the only option. Jane wrinkled her nose, disturbed by the suggestion to a darker aspect of her past. "You said Gerðr gave you the dagger?"

"Yes." Everything had been slightly fuzzy at the time, but now the moment was clear. "She said that when the time came, I'd need it, and she was right. We wouldn't have been able to escape without it."

Clothes rustled in the depths of the cave. "Then she freed you from Útgarðar?"

"No, she did that first." Jane swallowed. "Gerðr wasn't anything like the frost giants that had come to me before. I remember thinking that she had to be a dream. It was only once she said my name that I knew she wasn't. Now it seems silly that I ever thought that to start with."

The dagger had come to a stop, and she stared at the flickering line of fire reflected in the steel. Pressing the hilt to the ground, the point jumped up, the flat edge angled so it was her face mirrored on the blade.

"She made me promise… said she would help me so long as I set you free and rebuilt the Bi-Frost." When she released the dagger, tired of looking at her worn and weary image, it clattered loudly against the rock. "Obviously, I accepted."

"And so you made a deal with the devil."

"Gerðr's hardly the devil."

"She is a jötun, Jane. A frost giant." All the noise from behind her stopped. "She's a monster."

With a frustrated sigh, Jane stopped tracing ovals around the dagger, sat up, and twisted around, no longer caring at that point whether Loki was dressed or not. It turned out he was, but only partially. His feet were bare. So was everything from the waist up. After a cursory once-over, she focused on his face and nothing else, though not without some effort.

"I'll admit the frost giants aren't the most pleasant beings I've ever met…" They were both motionless, Jane pretzeled on the ground and Loki standing at the edge of the hot spring. "But you seem to have a personal vendetta against them."

"Have you forgotten Munnr Død?"
"No, but just because Gerðr's a frost giant doesn't make her like the rest of them. She helped me escape because she wants to get home to Freyr." Why, exactly, she couldn't say. Freyr obviously wasn't the patron of fidelity. Still… "If anything, that makes her more human."

The hands that had been tying the laces at the front of his trousers fistled, lowered slowly to each side. "How do you know Freyr?"

Jane narrowed her eyes at Loki's tone and unfurled. "I met him in Asgard." When he began to cross the cave, she boldly stood her ground, refusing to back down even when he stopped directly in front of her.

"Were you alone with him?"

"No."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Yes."

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing, really."

"Do not lie to me, Jane."

"Why does it matter what—"

"Jane."

"He offered to show me the gardens." Jane huffed and crossed her arms. "Which I didn't do, by the way, since that's apparently some kind of weird Asgardian code for having sex."

Put off by the insistency of his questions, she finally gave in and stepped back. The added space was nice. If nothing else, it helped clear her head. Loki might have been playing at intimidation, using the several extra inches he had to tower over her, but it wasn't his looming that affected her so much as his half-nakedness while doing so.

Because the long, lean expanse of Loki's torso was undoubtedly distracting.

Squeezing thumb and middle finger to her temples, she tried to look elsewhere. His face, his feet, the fire, the hot spring, the stone walls, the back of her eyelids… anything except the bare chest at eye level. And she failed spectacularly. Loki was no Thor physically, but there was still something about him, something that spoke to her at a base level.

With a sudden jolt, Jane slipped past Loki, cheeks warm despite the frigid temperature. "Are you satisfied with that, or is there something else you'd like to ask?"

"That was sufficient."

"Come on…" She hesitated by the hot spring before reaching down to retrieve the tunic crumpled at the edge. "Are you sure you don't want to know what I really wished I'd said when I found out his intentions?"

Loki was still on the other side of the cave, but she could see the slight smirk curling his mouth nevertheless. "I'm sure."
"Your loss. It was a good one." The heat faded from her cheeks as she grinned and chunked the tunic at him. "Now would you please get dressed?"

Wind whipped through the mountain range, too hard and fierce to coax a song of any kind from the crystal peaks. The weather in Jötunheim could never be classified as pleasant, but some days were undoubtedly worse than others. Right now, it was a good day. In less than an hour, it would be a bad day.

It wasn't some sort of secret knowledge. Anyone with nerve endings would've been able to sense it, because normally just frigid and smelling of rime, the gusts had begun to carry an edge, an undercurrent, a heaviness that was reflected in the dismal bank of clouds crawling across the land from the distant horizon.

A storm was approaching.

Fast.

Shielding her eyes from the north wind, Jane peeked over the edge of the embankment and called down to the splash of green and black making its way up the mountainside. "We should probably get inside before the storm hits."

Loki paused with one hand on a rocky outcrop to glance up. "Why are you outside to begin with?"

"You were gone for a long time." Or at least it had felt long. It was hard to know for sure without a means of telling time. "And I got bored."

Shaking his head, Loki returned to the task at hand with what sounded like a mocking snort. Then again, the wind was sucking their words away so quickly that she might have only imagined it. Jane eased closer to the precipice to continue tracking his progress through a concave section of the cliff face, holding out her arms for balance. Only once he was standing on the plateau did she step back.

"So…" Loki wiped nonexistent dust from his hands, actively avoiding her eyes, tone purposely offhand. "Now I am responsible for providing you with entertainment as well as food and shelter."

"Don't be dramatic. You know I didn't mean it like that."

After a long, hard look, Loki slipped by, and Jane immediately turned after him, stumbling through the knee-deep snow to keep up. Thankfully, it was a short trek back to their cave. Snowflakes had begun to mark the wind gusts, thickening rapidly as the incoming storm swallowed what little light there was.

"Any specific reason you decided to go rock climbing today instead of taking the easy route? Or easier, at any rate. That trail was pretty rough, but it was still better than taking on a sheer cliff with your bare hands. Or was it because you were bored too and wanted a challenge? I wouldn't blame you, if so. There's no way I'd survive climbing that, but I would if I could because all this sitting around is… whoa!"

Loki spun on her as quickly as he'd brushed past, and Jane all but ran into him, momentarily crushing her nose against his sternum before tripping backwards. Rubbing at her nose, she scowled up at him through watering eyes. He didn't seem angry, just… contemplative, maybe? Or brooding.
"What was that about?"

Taking a step forward, he deliberately crowded into her personal space. "Why are you in such a pleasant mood?" Yes, it was definitely brooding with the way his brows furrowed together and eyes flicked between hers.

"Umm… I didn't know I was." Admittedly, today was the best she'd felt since landing in Asgard, but to call her mood pleasant would be a stretch.

"You are."

"I'm sorry?" An unsure laugh forced its way out. She had no idea what the problem was or why her mood mattered to Loki. Still, she couldn't help but offer a crooked smirk when he sighed and turned. "Is that not a good thing? Would it be better if I was depressed all the time instead? Or should I act surly and testy like you?"

"I am not surly." He spanned the last few feet to the cave, stepping high through the snowdrifts. "Or testy." Then he stood to one side of the entrance and gestured her in. "Now go inside."

Jane crossed her arms – one, to keep the wind from prying open the front of the surcoat; two, to give a visual to her obvious skepticism because who did he think he was kidding? – and arched a brow, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from full-out grinning.

It was a risk, teasing Loki when she'd only known him – or remembered knowing him – for a few days. The last thing she wanted was to push him away. But based on their interactions so far, she figured it would take more than that for him to give up. Not to mention that it felt… right, somehow. Normal. Like they'd been doing it forever.

"No, you're not surly or testy at all. I don't know what I was thinking." But then the storm rumbled a warning in the distance, and she relented, traipsed over to the cave, paused just long enough to smirk up at him. "And don't tell me what to do."

Loki snorted. "Most likely, you weren't thinking at all. I don't know what I was thinking." But then the storm rumbled a warning in the distance, and she relented, traipsed over to the cave, paused just long enough to smirk up at him. "And I'll do as I please."

"I just don't understand why he wouldn't come for you."

From the relative safety of the cave, Jane alternated between watching the storm roll in and a fresh supply of firewood shimmer into view. It wasn't the first time she'd seen Loki use his magic, but it never ceased to amaze her. Who knew what kind of data she'd be able to collect if she had some of her equipment.

Loki lounged against the wall, eyes shut. "Why would he?"

"Oh, I don't know… because you're his son? That would be a fairly logical reason." The wind changed direction, blasting right into the cave, and Jane hid her face in the pelt thrown across her knees until it subsided. "And yet you thought he'd rescue me over you."

"You are important to Thor."
“You are too.” She decided not to comment on the fact that Loki was deliberately bringing up Thor when he'd told her not to. "I knew him all of three days. How old did you say you were? Two thousand? That's a long time to be around each other, a lot of history. I don't think I'd ever be more important to him than his brother."

Loki laughed bitterly. "Brother…” Then he slowly opened his eyes, finding her. "I sat on Asgard's throne and sent the Destroyer to kill her one-time prince. Banished or not, it doesn't matter. Thor was a member of the royal family. And then I tried to lay waste to Jötunheim using the Bi-Frost."

"Is that why the bridge was broken?"

"Yes. This is the punishment for my crimes, you see, leaving me to the jötnar's devices." With a scornfully curled lip, his gaze shifted to the fire. "Any feelings Thor might have regarding me are inconsequential."

"But you make it sound like that's not the only reason." Wind forgotten, Jane stared at him outright. "Why else do you think Odin would leave you here, Loki?"

"There are many reasons. The All-Father simply had to take his pick."

He sounded so lost, so… broken. She knew better than to think that he'd share the specifics with her, but whatever he was going through, the internal struggle was blatant, written clearly in the lines etched at the corners of his mouth and the furrowed brow and the shadows in his eyes.

"Is it because you think you're a monster?"

Aside from the tension that flooded his form, Loki went impossibly still. "What?"

"You always say monster like you are one." Jane arched an eyebrow. "Don't think I haven't noticed."

"Perhaps I am."

The howling wind nearly drowned out his murmured words. If the expression on his face was anything to go by, he would've preferred having his reply lost. But she heard it nevertheless, and her heart physically hurt for him.

"You're not." For the second time that evening, their eyes locked. "Whatever you think you are, a monster isn't one of them."

Lightning cut a jagged streak across the sky, illuminating the world bright-white. In the impossibly dark aftermath, the reverberations of thunder were amplified by the high-lows of the mountain range while the seemingly hurricane-force winds gusted mercilessly into the cave, battering the fire and what little warmth it managed to generate in the sub-zero temperatures.

Winter thunderstorms weren't common, but if they were all like this, Jane would've been happy to go her whole life without experiencing one.

Turning up the collar of Loki’s surcoat, she angled her back to the wind and blinked until she could see the fire sans spots again. A fresh round of goosebumps had broken out across her arms, and she
halfheartedly rubbed at them with one hand. When that didn't help, she rearranged the handful of animal pelts around her and curled into a ball on the ground.

The combination of thick leather and fur protected her from the worst of the weather, but she still couldn't quite condense her body into something small enough to stay truly warm. Ever since the storm had rolled in, it had given a whole new meaning to the word *cold*.

Jane tucked as much of her face as possible into the crossing lapels. It helped – her ears and nose had long since gone numb, and she was pretty sure she was getting a wind-burn on her cheeks – but not as much as she'd hoped. At the rate things were going, they'd be lucky to survive the night.

Or *she* would, rather.

Because lounging against the cave wall beside her with his legs stretched out and his arms folded in his lap, Loki didn't appear even the slightest bit inconvenienced.

It was like he was completely impervious to the cold. She'd been wearing his surcoat since they'd arrived in the mountains, and in that entire time he hadn't complained or even shivered, just went about his business both inside and outside the cave wearing nothing but the same pants and tunic she'd found him in, although he'd spared a little magic to mend the gaps in the fabric.

He obviously didn't need the extra layer of clothing, though.

Judging by the warmth that ran along the length of her back, he was doing just fine.

Loki had moved to sit beside her when the storm finally broke, effectively encasing Jane in a square that consisted of the wall, the fire, a rocky protrusion, and his body. It wasn't much, but it was something. She'd been able to feel the hint of warmth in her arm and shoulder when they'd been sitting next to each other. Now, lying on the ground, she could feel that heat down her spine, emanating from the long legs paralleling her back.

Another gust blew through the cave, and Jane clenched her teeth against the bone-deep chill. Then, cursing the storm under her breath, she inched backwards until Loki's legs were pressed against her. And when that still didn't help, she threw caution and modesty and propriety to the wind, and buried her face in the hard muscle of his thigh.

As if on cue, Loki shifted. Her first thought was that he was offended by her actions and was trying to create more space. But her thoughts scattered altogether when he slid down the wall to rest on his side, organized the pelts over them, and pulled her against his chest instead.

Instant warmth flooded through her, so much so that Jane didn't care one iota about indecency or decorum or whose body hers was molded to. People in survival situations came together to stay alive in worse ways than they currently were. At least they were still fully clothed. However, it would be a lie if she said her heart wasn't skittering a bit at the contact.

"Thank you." Her voice sounded muffled in the hollow of Loki's throat. "This would all be a whole lot easier if I wasn't so…" The rest of the sentence dissolved as a shiver wracked her body.

"Susceptible to dying?"

Despite the gravity of everything, Jane could hear the jest in his tone and offered a weak chuckle. "That sounds about right."

Loki's chin dropped onto the crown of her head. "Humans are notoriously fragile."
"Pretty inconvenient, if you ask me. We're clumsy, get hurt easily, catch diseases, make war… no wonder your people and all the realms faded into myths. I would've avoided us too."

But then, that wasn't wholly true.

From what she'd gathered, humans were the only race that had no idea of the others. They'd been segregated, pushed aside, forgotten, and for what reason? Because they were fragile? Because they didn't possess god-like powers or the ability to wield magic? Because they were born and lived and died in what probably only constituted a breath to someone that lived forever? One hundred years was nothing compared to the endless span of eternity, but they'd thrived nevertheless, accomplishing incredible things in the small amount of time they'd been given.

Aristotle's works earned him the title First Teacher. Mozart composed his first arrangement when he was only five and had added over six hundred pieces to his collection by the time he died roughly thirty years later. Leonardo da Vinci, a leading member of the Renaissance, was proficient in sculptures and painting, architecture and music, mathematics and anatomy and engineering. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s actions changed a nation. Hitler's actions changed the world.

So it could be that keeping humans in the dark and letting them live in their own little bubble made things easier for those in other realms.

But that didn't make it right.

A sudden clap of thunder boomed so loudly the entire mountain trembled with the force of it, and Jane's fingers instinctively tightened in Loki's shirtfront. The hand slung about her waist slid up to press flat between her shoulder blades in response, firm and warm and steady.

It wasn't uncomfortable. That wasn't the way she'd describe how his fingers felt over the sloping contours of her back at all. If anything, it was that it was too comfortable, too familiar, too everything, and Jane found herself desperately backpedaling.

She needed to concentrate on the sleet's rhythmic roar as it pounded the mountainside, not the out-of-control beating of her heart. She needed to feel the icy wind, not his warm breath when he tilted his head just right. She needed to focus on the rock-hard stone beneath her body, not the perfect way her head tucked into the curve of his neck or every inch of contact they shared.

She needed to pull back – maybe emotionally, probably mentally, definitely physically – and make their position less, somehow. Less charged, less anticipatory. Just less. Because she wasn't the only one experiencing it. There was a telling shift of Loki's body against hers and everything that had once felt so cold was now warm and…

"Do you love him?"

And everything screeched to a halt as Jane blinked stupidly, stared at nothing, and didn't move at all. "What?"

"Thor." Loki's chin slid to her temple, breath ghosting over the shell of her ear. "Do you love him?"

Thor. Heroic, good-natured Thor with his wide smile and bright eyes and open-book personality. Thor who had patiently explained the realms despite her disbelief, then taken her to Asgard so she could have the proof for herself. Thor who had retrieved her notebook, tucked a blanket around her, fallen asleep with their fingers intertwined.

Undoubtedly, there was something about him.
But did she love him?

"No." The initially firm edge to her voice tempered somewhat. "I mean, I'm sure I could, but we barely know each other. Saving someone's life doesn't automatically lead to love. Not real love, at least. You need more time to develop something like that." Jane distractedly played with the lapels outlining her jaw. "He is nice, though. I'll give him that."

"In the years following the Æsir-Vanir war, Thor took great pleasure in slowly killing the rebels."

"And you tried to have him killed while he was powerless and in exile." When Loki didn't say anything, she added softly. "There's good and bad in everyone, Loki… and all people, even gods, can change."

It had been baffling watching the centuries-old immortals go at it the way they had, Thor holding Mjölnir threateningly above Loki who had prepared to finish off Thor with the scepter in return. Never had she witnessed what should be an unshakeable relationship crumble so disastrously. It was sobering, disheartening to the point she would've written their actions off as a one-time thing just to make herself feel better if it wouldn't have been such a blatant lie. The resentment practically radiating off Loki didn't leave room for anything but the truth.

And then there was the matter of his revelation…

Both had been willing murders at some point in their lives. They'd killed for revenge or pleasure or spite or just because, and even worse was that they'd enjoyed it. She'd seen the eager fury in Loki's eyes on the bridge, could imagine Thor, arrogant like he'd been in the beginning, advancing on a hapless enemy all too well. The idea made her stomach turn.

But they were more than just killers. Thor had willingly sacrificed himself to save the residents of Puente Antiguo just as Loki had willingly sacrificed himself and the restoration of his magic to provide her with warmth, healing, and life.

It was all so at odds. Good and bad. Right and wrong. Was it possible to reconcile who Thor and Loki had been with who they seemed to be now? Was it possible to reconcile the two of them to each other? It was amazing how two people, two brothers, could be so different and so alike at the same time.

"I don't know what happened, but you and Thor have some issues to work through when all this is done." Jane breathed a sardonic laugh to ease the tension, more for her own benefit than Loki's, and buried her face in his chest to wait out the storm. "Some serious issues."

"I was wrong."

Jane perched carefully at the cave entrance, gazing out at the blanket of ice that coated everything. The storm had raged for almost a full day, battering the mountains with wind, lightning and thunder, and sleet. But now, in the stillness left in its wake, all of Jötunheim literally glistened in the moonlight.

"When we first got here, I thought everything about this place was ugly. The perpetual darkness, the cold, all the snow and ice… I hated it. All of it. I just wanted to go home."
Holding tight to a nearby rock, she experimentally poked at the closest patch of ice and smiled when it gave way to the powdery snow beneath.

"But it's not ugly at all." When she scooped up a handful of snow, it felt like air in her palm. "Don't get me wrong, this realm is harsh, primitive… but it's not ugly." Still grinning, she blew on the snow and watched it drift away in the slight breeze. "There's a bit of wonder in everything if you take the time to look for it."

Behind her, Loki remained silent.

"What happened?"

Lying on her back with arms crossed beneath her head, Jane stared up at the cave ceiling unseeingly and deliberated the answer to Loki's question. It wasn't very often that he asked something first, so she felt like she needed to respond. Still, she rolled the answer around her mouth, tested the weight of something she'd only spoken about to a select few people for a moment before speaking carefully.

"Skull fracture, contusion, subdural hematoma, cerebral edema…" Eleven years later and she could still recite what the doctors had told her like it was only yesterday. "In the end, it resulted in a bad case of amnesia."

Complete and utter memory loss. Of everything except her name, of course, but even that had tasted the slightest bit wrong on the tip of her tongue.

"On good days, I'd joke with Erik and tell him how I have a broken brain." Jane breathed a laugh. "He never thought it was very funny."

"Erik." Black and green shifted in the corner of her eye. "A friend?"

"You could say that."

Friend, however, was the understatement of the century. Then again, there wasn't any one word that could adequately describe how much the eccentric physicist meant to her. He was both colleague and teacher, friend and father. When she'd had nothing, he'd become her everything.

"He was the one who found me. I think that's why it bothers him. Because I may be able to turn it into a joke, but all he can see is me lying there in a pool of blood. His words, not mine." Jane's eyes fell, voice lowering into a soft murmur. "I can't really blame him. I imagine it would be hard to move past something like that."

Smoke. She only smelled it for an instant, but it was enough to make the grey-blue cave with its grey-blue stone and its grey-blue light fade away, darken into brown. Brown mixed with green. And there was red, too. Red like a sunset on the ocean. Red like fire. Red like blood.

But then she blinked and the world settled back into itself, leaving her with nothing but a high-pitched ringing in her ears and the uneasy sensation of something slick around her fingers.

"It was a rock. That's what they told me, at least." Swallowing hard, Jane subtly pressed her fingertips to the decade-old scar beneath her hair. "There are plenty of rocks in Stora Karlsö – the island is literally covered in them – but the rock I hit was the only one for a hundred yards in any
direction." She chuckled again, albeit cynically. "What are the odds, right?"

"And you choose to believe in chance over fate."

"I have to." Her fingers ran back and forth over the thin ridge of scar tissue. "Living in a world where I was destined to suffer the things I have… it's a pretty dismal thought."

Another log was added to the fire, and the soft glow flared brightly on the ceiling for a moment. "The Norns are not a companion or supporter, nor are they the just and righteous god many of the mortals worship. They are what they are, impartial beings removed from the rest of Yggdrasil."

"Some people believe they're punished for what they've done wrong." Though if that were the case, she had to wonder what all she'd done for her penalty to be memory loss.

"They are also incorrect."

"Do any of us really know what's going on, though?" Looking back, Jane saw Loki facing away from her, sitting before the fire and absently poking at the crumbling wood. "We're all just flying blind hoping we don't crash into anything, and if believing in God or fate or nothing at all makes someone feel better, I say go for it."

"Belief… people cling to faith like a lifeline. Always have, always will." Loki's head canted to one side. "Did the healers ever determine what transpired before your injury?"

Mouth twisting wryly, Jane returned to her previous position to stare at the ceiling. "No, they didn't. They couldn't even come up with a reasonable guess."

But how could they when nothing made any sense? The weather in Stora Karlsö had been too temperate to allow frostbite, and there'd been no sign of a fire anywhere on the island. No explanation for anything, just an endless stream of questions. It was the story of her life.

"For the longest time I didn't remember anything. I woke up in a hospital with nothing but a name, a head full of stitches, and a dozen different medications in my bloodstream. And I was speaking Swedish, of all things." Jane moved one hand, pressed the heel of it firmly to her forehead. "There was nothing."

"And now?"

"There's still nothing." It was hard to tell who her single bark of laughter startled more, Loki or herself. Both of them jumped at the sound, and when she glanced back, Loki was observing her carefully over his shoulder. "But there's more than there used to be."

Jane reached up, arm straight, fingers stretching to the ceiling.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm on the verge of remembering. There are flashes of things, feelings I can't explain… it's like the memories are right there and all I have to do is reach out and grab it, but every time I do, my fingers fall right through it."

Her hand closed on air, and when she reopened it, there was only the nothing that had been in her fist.

"It's like trying to catch smoke."
Rubbing at her legs in a vain attempt to warm them, Jane dropped into the cave. That was the one part she hadn't gotten used to. Bathing in a hot spring, filthy clothes, tossing out animal remains, sleeping on rocks… she could handle all of that fairly well. But having to pull down her pants to go to relieve herself outside was something she despised if only because it took her so long to warm up afterwards.

With a shiver and a frown, she approached the fire. Loki was right where she'd left him – lying on his side, head close as possible to the fire and feet farthest away, eyes closed – and she sunk back to her spot beside him. Drawing one of the pelts over her shoulders, she curled up on the ground, scooting backwards until her back pressed to his.

The contact wasn't strange anymore. Ever since the storm, they'd stopped caring so much about keeping their distance. Sharing body heat was better anyway, and it wasn't like they were spooning or cuddling. It was survival, plain and simple. And maybe a little bit of comfort, not that she would ever admit to that out loud.

"Loki?" Jane felt more than heard his quiet response as a hum around her spine. "What will the frost giants do if they find out Gerðr was the one who helped me escape?"

"Kill her."

"Oh." The thought of Gerðr being killed simultaneously made her stomach clench and strengthened her resolve. "What will they do if they catch us?"

"Kill us."

"Even me?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Jane worried her lower lip, debating whether to say anything else. Curiosity won out in the end, though, and she turned just enough to see the slope of Loki's shoulder from the corner of her eye. "Loki?"

The shoulder rose and fell with an extravagant sigh. "What is it, Jane?"

"Do you…" She paused, took a deep breath, regrouped. "Are you afraid of dying?"

Seconds ticked by punctuated only by the crackling fire, so many that Jane wondered if Loki even intended to answer. She'd just turned to face the opposite direction again when his voice reached her.

"We are not supposed to fear death."

"I know." Those who lived their lives bravely and boldly and without fear would eventually go to Valhalla. There, in a hall ceileding with golden shields and decorated by the golden tree Glasir, they would live eternally in honor. Jane remembered that much from the countless stories Erik had told her over the years. "But that's not what I asked."

Loki inhaled, his back expanding and pressing into hers.

"Sometimes."

And when his body pulled away on the exhale, she instinctively rounded her spine to maintain the
"Have you ever been in love?"

To his credit, Loki didn't even appear fazed by her sudden question. The only sign that it might have caught him off guard was the way his eyes snapped to hers from where he was crouched on the other side of the fire. But that could have just been the forwardness of her question.

His head tilted almost imperceptibly. "What do you believe?"

"I think you have." Confident in her supposition, Jane nodded. "I can't see how someone couldn't in two thousand years."

"Trysts." The corner of Loki's mouth quirked into a half-smirk. "So long as there are women to bed, particularly the daughters of visiting dignitaries as they're the most willing to rebel, there is little room for love."

"Well that's attractive."

Jane knew he was only joking, though, could tell it by the playful smirk he cast her way, and she rolled her eyes with a barely contained smile. Tossing another log on the fire, she watched the sparks danced up into the air between them before burning out. Then, feeling slightly restless, she decided to keep her hands busy by systematically breaking off stray twigs from the rest of the firewood.

"Have you?"

Her fingers fell still halfway through clearing the third log. "What?"

"Have you ever been in love?" The playfulness from before was gone. Loki was studying her carefully, reading her every reaction like a book. "With anyone?"

It was a delicate subject, brittle, something she could appreciate more now that she was on the other side of the conversation. No wonder he'd been so eager to side-step the question. She breathed a nervous ghost of a laugh and absently ran a hand through her hair.

"Um… well, I've only been exclusive with a couple guys in the past decade, so there hasn't been too much of an opportunity. But even with them, I…" If she'd been fidgety earlier, it was nothing compared to now. "I mean, I loved them, but I didn't love them."

So why didn't she just say no?

Jane rested her elbows on her knees, laced her fingers together in front of her mouth, and moved them from side to side, listening to a different knuckle crack with each sway. It wasn't something she'd ever really thought about, but she knew the reason for her stalling.

It was because no wasn't the right answer.

"But I have been in love."
And the truth was a living thing, swelling in her chest.

"I don't remember who he was or even what he looked like, but I remember certain things. Sitting on a beach and stargazing and music…” Jane broke off to correct herself. "Jazz music. Cedar in winter. Sunrises, too, and the texture of his hair when I ran my fingers through it. I remember what it felt like to be in love." With a longing smile, she regarded Loki. "Funny how some things stick with you even when everything else is gone."

Chapter End Notes

Again, not too much other stuff going on here. The only thing to point out would be the recurring theme of monsters that began in the last chapter. Between the recent discovery of his heritage, his experiences with the frost giants, and the fact that he’s having to spend time with a Jane that doesn’t remember him – the cause of which is indirectly his fault – Loki’s struggling with some deep stuff and is dealing with a lot of self-hatred. That’s why the scene where Jane tells him he’s not a monster is so important. One, because it’s a reassurance against the current issues; two, because it ties back to their fallout in Sweden when she says that he’s nothing but a monster.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

So... this is over a week late in getting posted here. So sorry for making everyone wait! Life is insanely busy right now and will continue to be so until after mid-April. Try to bear with me until then.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“There are gods inside your mind, gods and monsters, angels and devils. It’s true what they say – where there is one, there is always the other.”

2012: Gröf Miðli, Jötunheim

Woods gave way to fire, grass to skulls, air to smoke. The sky was a charcoal canopy, heavy and bloated. It looked like it could rain coal and ashes at any second. There was a high-pitched ringing in her ears, but she couldn't quite tell if it was because everything was too loud or too eerily quiet.

"Jane."

A shadow fell over her. She tried to find the features in the dark void where a face should be, but the figure was retreating. Or she was retreating. No, she was falling, descending, sinking into a thousand-person grave where bony fingers scratched at her throat and arms, tangled in her hair.

"Jane."

And she was screaming. Screaming without noise. The sound disappeared into the vacuum that had swallowed everything else, but she knew she was screaming because her throat was raw and bleeding. There was iron in her mouth. It mixed with the earthy taste of soil and calcium-dust from the partially dissolved bones, dripped from between her lips onto the hand that grasped her chin with bruising force, the hand that forced her eyes up and up and up towards…

Still trapped in the fuzzy place between sleep and awake, Jane struck out wildly, wincing when her forearm connected with something solid. She drew back again, but before she could land another blow, a hand caught both her wrists and forced her arms to the ground above her head. Breathing heavily, she struggled in vain against the presence crouched above her. Whoever it was, they were immovable.

"Jane."

She recognized the voice and stopped instantly, muscles quivering with tension, back arched mid-
thrash. It was a strange sensation, not being able to completely tell what was real from what wasn’t, but the longer she blinked, the more things settled into place. And it felt like forever – although it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds – before a familiar set of features blurred into focus.

"Loki?"

"It was a dream." Jane dimly registered the weight that had been pressing against her hipbone easing as Loki moved to brace his other hand on the ground near her waist. "It was just a dream."

The grip around her wrists loosened somewhat, and she gratefully rotated them, feeling life flow back into her hands. But with every blink, fire and death and shadows lingered unnervingly in her mind's eye. Letting her head fall to the side, she blew out a shaky breath to disguise the shudder working its way through her body.

Just a dream…

More like a nightmare.

The last few traces of tension bled away and left Jane sagging against the cold rocks, exhausted and utterly spent. Most of the time, she didn’t dream at all. When she did, it was always the same. But it had been a long time since the recurring dream – nightmare – had affected her so badly.

Loki slowly withdrew his hand, fingers skimming lightly from her wrist to her elbow before falling away completely when they met the sleeve that had bunched around her upper arm during their scuffle. It wasn’t anything too terribly out of the ordinary. He’d held her when they escaped Munnr Død and when she fell in the cave, through the worst of the storm and while healing her. Even still, the breath stuck in her throat.

An unwelcome heat crept from beneath her collar, and suddenly self-conscious, Jane tugged down the surcoat’s sleeves and lifted onto her elbows. Loki leaned back accordingly to give her room. However, he didn't retreat far, just sat back on his left heel while his right foot remained planted against her inner thigh, straddling her leg.

"Sorry…” Jane nodded towards his arm. "I didn't mean to hit you."

"Yes, you did."

A chuckle burst out unbidden, and she felt some of the pressure drain away. "Well, yeah, I guess I did, but it wasn't you I was trying to hit."

Loki searched her face as if he wanted to ask her something, but he never did. Instead, their stalemate stretched out a moment longer before he rotated to sit beside her legs, facing away. More than a little confused – but too used to it by that point to be thrown by Loki's ever-shifting moods – Jane sat up.

"The food I brought back will not last us long. I'll need to find more." Loki held out the dagger hilt-first. "Can you clean this one while I hunt down the next?"

As the last of the dream dwindled, so did the heaviness that had been weighing her down. It was freeing. Feeling unusually confident, Jane took the dagger, flipped it in her hand, and flashed Loki a grin when he glanced at her.

"I think I can handle it."
Jane swiped the back of her hand across her forehead, careful to avoid any contact with the dagger or her blood-smeared fingers. What remained of the animal lay at her feet. It wasn't much – most of the meat had been cubed up and set aside; the entrails and hide were piled behind her – but it was enough that she wasn't ready to give up yet. Every piece counted, and she'd be damned if she wasted the last bit of meat layered on the bones.

Pursing her lips, she studied the animal's shoulder. Loki usually quartered all his kills, and now she could see why. How was she supposed to maneuver around the hip and shoulder sockets when they were all still attached? She was just about to dig in regardless of which method would be best when a thump from behind signaled Loki's return.

"Perfect timing!" The dagger tip clicked against a mostly bare rib. "I can't, for the life of me, figure out how to—"

"Get up."

It was more his tone than the words themselves that had her snapping around, animal forgotten. Something was wrong. A dense set of clouds had swept across the sky earlier that day, blocking out the moonlight and leaving Jötunheim unnaturally dark, and she could barely find him in the resulting gloom. Only the reflection of his eyes betrayed his position.

"Why?" Picking up on the strained atmosphere, her pulse tripped a quicker rhythm. "What's going on?"

Loki ignored her, striding across the cave with a single-minded purpose. When he passed by the fire, the light highlighted a crimson smear down his cheek and an assortment of splotches splattered across the front of his clothes. The side of his tunic had been slashed open, the two ends flapping wildly. Blood welled from a deep gash underneath. More of it dripped from his fingertips.

Heart leaping into her throat, Jane scrambled to her feet. "What happened?"

"The jötnar have come to Söngr Fjøll. We must leave." He scattered the fire with a well-aimed kick. "Now."

"But it's too soon." Embers swirled through the air like fireflies. Aside from the glowing remains of the firewood, they were the last bit of light in the now obscure cave. "We're not…"

Ready. They weren't ready. That was the whole reason they'd been waiting in the cave to begin with, because they weren't ready. And they still weren't. She wasn't ready. Loki wasn't ready. His magic hadn't fully returned yet. They would've been gone by now if it had.

"Would you like to tell that to Skaði? Ask her to come back at a more convenient time? Forgive me if I don't join you."

"Yeah, that wasn't what I meant, but okay." Trying to stay calm, Jane took a deep breath. "So what are we going to do?"

"Leave. Go as far east as possible." Loki rustled with something to her right, and she turned automatically towards the sound. Útgarðar lies to the west, the north is inhospitable, and the jötnar will have left guards at the southern ruins. East is our only option."

A sinking feeling weighed down Jane's stomach. She'd been right: their flight would only be a relocation, not a journey all the way home. The battle for their lives wasn't over yet. They were still
running, still trying to make it one more day, still trying to outwit a race of creatures on their own turf. It was only a matter of time before their luck ran out.

"How long will that buy us?"

"Not enough." The last of the embers winked out. From the looks of it, the logs wouldn't be far behind. "Söngr Fjøll is the last key landmark before the eastern border."

"Fantastic…" Jane hugged her elbows, trying desperately to see anything. "Still, I don't see how we'll even get that far. If the frost giants are already in the mountains, we can hardly outrun them."

There was no telltale shift in the darkness to tip her off, only the sudden cognizance that Loki was standing right in front of her. "Who said anything about running?" Then his hands were on her hips and he was pulling her close, pulling her against his body, pulling her through space-time.

Black deepened and darkened before waning to blue, and when Jane opened eyes she didn't even remember closing, the cave had been exchanged for lowlands. Without leaving the circle of Loki's arms, she looked left towards the misty peaks in the distance and then right towards a rolling, boulder-studded plain.

Already miserably strong in Söngr Fjøll, the wind was doubly so out in the open. It shrieked down from the mountains like a banshee, whipping her hair into a tangled mess, buffeting the ends of the surcoat against her legs, and freezing the moisture at the corners of her eyes. And it stung. She could feel the ice-burn of it on her hands and face as bad as any fire.

"We have to keep moving." When she did the exact opposite, staying firmly planted in the ankle-deep snow, Loki's hands slid into the curve of her waist. "Jane."

But there was something different about the way he said her name. A little halting, a strange uplift at the end… and before she could release him or look at him or even think about doing either, Loki turned to dead weight and forced her to the ground.

Their fall was all kinds of ungainly. They'd been standing too close to collapse gracefully. Taken by surprise, Jane landed mostly on her knees, jeans instantly going wet with snow. Loki, however, had crumpled before toppling to the side. Only her arms around his torso – a quick reaction on her part – prevented him from falling over completely.

"What the…?"

Sitting back on her heels, Jane steadied Loki the best she could. Seeing how there was significantly more of him than her, though, the most she could do was use her own body as a support. The bulk of him sprawled between her legs, shoulder and arm digging into her sternum. Trapped by his weight, moving wasn't an option. The only thing she could do was wince when his head connected painfully with her collarbone.

To say his collapse was disconcerting would be an understatement. He was always so strong. Even during the ordeal in Munnr Død, he'd been strong. So what had happened to bring him to his knees now? Had even the small jump they'd taken through space-time been too much?

The answer came in the fingerprints she left on his chin when she tried to turn his face.

Jane craned her neck and took in the artwork of blood that decorated his tunic and, after being pressed together during their trip, her shirtfront. He'd acted so normal in the cave – or as normal as one could act when being hunted down by frost giants – that she'd forgotten the signs that had initially scared her. Now she wondered how she could've forgotten them for even a moment.
"Loki?" Full awareness brought along a fresh wave of panic and the tangy scent of iron. It was so strong she could almost taste it when she licked her lips, taste it like the blood in her dream. "Loki!"

The fingers still firmly affixed to her waist twitched, and he straightened with a low grunt. "We're wasting time." He batted away her hand that had immediately gone to his chest. "We must keep going."

"But you're hurt…" With a frown, Jane slapped his hand right back and reached out. "And bleeding…" She probed worryingly at a particularly large swatch of red near his left shoulder. "And…"

The corner of Loki's mouth twitched. "Always so concerned for my safety." The end result was more grimace than smirk, though.

"You can't expect to travel anywhere like this."

"Æsir recover faster than most. I will be fine." Loki abruptly stood, left her kneeling in the cavity they'd created in the snow surrounded by crimson droplets that marred the otherwise pristine white. "The majority of the blood isn't mine."

Still frowning, Jane got up and pulled away the torn end of his tunic to reveal the eight-inch long gash in his abdomen. "All of this is."

The fabric was waterlogged, dense with the weight of the blood it had absorbed, while more continued to trickle down beneath the waistline of Loki's pants. Still more was smeared around the wound in varying stages of drying. Vivid against his skin, the contrast was reminiscent of the blood on the snow.

But the wound must have looked worse than it was because he stood well enough – back straight, shoulders squared, jaw set, chin lifted – despite the thin sheen on his face that shouldn't have been there in the fierce wind. Not that the injury was anything to laugh at, of course. Between the length and depth, it was severe enough to where any average person would've either bled out or passed out by that point. And yet, he was on his feet. It wasn't the first time Jane had felt immensely grateful that Loki was nowhere near average.

That didn't keep her stomach from turning at the sight, though.

It wasn't a clean wound. The edges were ragged and frayed, like the perpetrator had been forced to work at it. Jane imagined a dull, serrated knife sawing into Loki's side. Then she promptly stopped imagining it. And to keep herself from imagining anything else, she impulsively ripped a length of fabric from her shirt hem, balled it up, and pressed it to the laceration.

"Stop, Jane." She fought to keep one hand on the material even as she struggled against the hands that grappled for hers. "Don't—" It was already darkening from dirty grey to burgundy. "Jane."

She fell still, eyes snapping up dutifully at Loki's tone and flitting restlessly between his. There was no anger in his expression, no pain in the grey-green, just a combination of wry amusement and slight exasperation.

"I'll heal."

"I know, I just…" Loki stepped back, holding onto her hands for a second longer than necessary before allowing her fingers to slide free. Not knowing what to do with them but needing to do something, she clawed her tangled hair into a low ponytail and held it there. "I was just…"
Worried.

She'd been worried.

Abnormally worried, fearfully worried, unexplainably worried. The kind of worried that simultaneously shot a dose of adrenaline straight into her heart and brought her mind screeching to a halt. Worried in a way that transcended a bond forged under mutually miserable circumstances or her needing him to get home or shared isolation where they only had each other.

But before she could even begin to rationalize her thoughts, the wind carried a sound down from the mountains.

Already on edge, Jane started and turned. "What was that?"

"A hound on the hunt. The jötnar have either found our cave or spotted us from this side of Söngr Fjøll." The sound came again, louder now and recognizable for the howl that it was. "Come." Loki's hand found the crook of her elbow and gently towed her back. "Let's go."

They ran.

And they ran.

They stepped through space-time one more time from the middle of the lowlands closer to what appeared to be a cliff overlooking a valley to break up the scent trail, and then they ran some more.

It was hard going. The snow was above their ankles at the best of times, but they'd occasionally encounter sections that came up to their thighs, and once, Jane sunk all the way to her waist and couldn't move. While Loki hauled her out of the snowdrift, she tried not to feel resentful about those last moments in the cave when he'd made it seem like they wouldn't have to run because she was getting really tired of running.

"Do you have a plan?"

"What?" Loki's response came out somewhat snappy, but that was probably due more to the fact that they were stationary instead of moving. Even with their second leap through space, the wolves' howling was growing louder.

"Do you have a plan?" Taking advantage of the short respite, Jane brushed the buildup of snow from her clothes and tried not to sound just as cranky. "Some kind of strategy? Are we running towards a hiding place or did you have something else in mind?"

"That is our destination." Loki nodded over her shoulder. "Gröf Miðli."

Shielding her eyes from the stinging wind, Jane turned to study a flat-topped rock in the distance. "I hate to break it to you, but that's a rock, not a hole."

"Hole is simply one way to put it. The jötnar consider it more of a grave."

Making it look altogether too easy, Loki eased around her and began striding down the next embankment. Apparently, that was the end of the conversation. Jane stood there for a few seconds catching her breath, watching his progress, before sighing deeply and following along the path he'd
cleared.

Gröf Miðli. The first word that had popped into her head had been *hole*, but Loki had said it meant *grave*. Neither word meshed well with the boulder he'd indicated. Neither word made her feel better, either. Hole and grave could be unsettling enough in a normal world, but in Jötunheim? It definitely didn't bode well.

*The grave between.*

What was that even supposed to mean?

The grave between what?

And why were they going there?

She was still rifling through all the possible ideas or meanings – each one more preposterous than the last – when Loki all but slammed into her. The oxygen left her lungs in a strained whoosh as he half-dragged, half-pushed her to the nearest boulder, forced her against it, and clasped a hand over her mouth.

"Quiet."

Immediately, Jane froze. There was an urgency to Loki that spoke louder than words, tension rolling from him in waves. It was hard to see in their close quarters, so she focused on his eyes as he glanced left and right and behind repeatedly. He was constantly searching, and she couldn't decide if that keenness reminded her more of a hunter or the hunted. Maybe it was a little of both.

When they rounded the minute mark without incident, she released the front of his tunic and tapped at his fingers in an unspoken question. Loki spared her only a fleeting look but obliged, flattening his hand against the rock beside her head instead.

"What's wrong?" A quick sweep of the landscape revealed nothing but rocks.

"The jötnar have caught up." The space between them was virtually nonexistent, hemmed as she was between the boulder and Loki's chest, which only seemed to amplify the way her heart knocked against the inside of her ribcage. "We are close to Gröf Miðli, but we'll have to tread carefully through this last area."

"Did you see them?"

"One." Loki assessed their surroundings again. "Travelling along a ridge two hundred paces to the north."

If a single pace was thirty inches on average, then two hundred paces would be approximately one hundred sixty-seven yards. Jane bit her lip. "That's not that far away."

"No, it isn't."

The nearness was even more nerve-wracking when taking into account that they both reeked. She remembered Loki's comment about how easily the winter hounds were able to track blood, and they were covered in it. After their last jump through space, he'd used some magic to mask their scent, but now she wondered how well that had worked.

"Jötnar hunt in packs, but they're often loosely spaced. Helps them cover more ground." Any more explanation would've been unnecessary when the meaning was clear. At least one frost giant was
probably nearby. "It will make avoiding detection hard. However, if discovered, there is a chance we can dispatch the jötun before it can alert the others."

Jane stretched up to snag Loki's eye. "We?" The last word she'd use to describe herself in physical combat would be asset. If anything, she was a liability.

"Yes…" The warm hilt of Gerðr's dagger slid unexpectedly against her palm. "We."

It was sort of like playing hide-and-seek, only a distorted, dangerous version where winning meant living to see another day and losing meant death. The boulders had increased in frequency the farther east they went, and Jane and Loki used them to their advantage at every opportunity, darting from one to the next, hiding in what little shadow the moonlight produced. More than once, they'd heard a muffled growl or subtle sniffing too close for comfort.

If it was a game, it wasn't fun.

Nothing added to stress like having one's life hanging in the balance, and their lives were, quite literally, on the line.

"There it is." Crouched down and panting hard, Jane placed a hand in the center of Loki's back to steady herself as she peered over his shoulder, following his gesture. "Gröf Miðli."

It still didn't look like much. The rock was large – easily three times the size of her lab in Puente Antiguo – and abnormally flat on top – almost like it had been purposely carved that way – but was otherwise unremarkable. What Loki had in mind by bringing them here, she had no clue. The most she could think was that whoever stood on top gained the tactical advantage of high ground if it came down to a battle.

"This is the last stretch." The muscles beneath her hand stiffened. "I'll go first. You wait here and watch for my signal."

"Whoa, hold on a second." Fingers latching onto his tunic, Jane yanked him back into a crouch. "You still haven't told me what we're doing here. What are we going to do when we get to the rock?"

"We'll climb to the top."

"And then?" She purposefully drew out the words, underscoring the need for something besides just climbing on top of a massive rock in the middle of nowhere while a horde of frost giants trailed them.

"We'll jump."

Loki was staring at her blankly, eyebrows raised, as if it was the most obvious answer in the world. They'd jump. Of course they'd jump. Why wouldn't they jump? Of all the options available, that was the most outrageous and made the least amount of sense, so naturally, it was what they'd be doing. God forbid there be a sensible, rational course of action.

"Let me get this straight… you want me to climb onto that rock and then jump over the cliff edge into open air just so I can probably land on another rock at the bottom of the valley and die." Jane waved a hand in the general direction of the stone and hissed under breath. "Are you insane?"
With a slight frown, Loki rotated to face her more fully. "What valley?"

"What valley?" She repeated his question with a scoff, despite its genuineness. "That valley! The one you're asking me to jump off Gröf Miðli into."

A sudden look of comprehension dawned on Loki's face, smoothed away the wrinkles that had been knitting his brow. "Gröf Miðli is no rock, Jane, but the space beyond. That isn't the beginnings of a valley you see. It is the edge of the world."

"Edge of… what?"

"The world. Jötunheim. Beyond that point, there is only the Void." Snow had begun to fall again in earnest, speckling the wind and blurring away their destination. "I'm asking you to jump into Gröf Miðli."

"The Void." A headache was blooming somewhere behind Jane's eyes. "I…" She knew that term, knew there was more to it than its deceptively simple definition, knew it was something risky. "But how…"

"Entering the Void is a death sentence for most. They will drift through the emptiness between Yggdrasil's branches for eternity. That is why the jötnar call it a grave."

Legs beginning to cramp from squatting for too long in the cold, Jane shifted uncomfortably. "If you're trying to reassure me, you're doing a poor job."

"I cannot carry us both through the realms. My magic has not returned enough for that. However, there are trace amounts of seiðr built into the Void." Loki's focus wandered to some point past her. "It is possible I might draw on that power, combine it with my own to locate an outlet."

"Possible, but not certain."

A hint of a smirk flitted across his face. "Is anything certain?"

"Fair enough."

In retrospect, she almost regretted asking about their plan. Their options were severely limited, but something about knowing they were about to leap into a place where they might escape but also might float around for the rest of eternity made her feel like throwing up. Maybe it would've been easier to have it sprung on her at the last second. There wouldn't have been as much time to think about it that way. It was too late now, though. Hindsight was twenty-twenty.

"Are you ready, Jane?"

She was. Or ready as she'd ever be, at least. But at the same time, she wasn't because…

"Gröf Miðli." Everything had clicked ominously into place, the meaning that had been so elusive before now evident, and the wind whipped away Jane's resigned sigh. "It's the grave between the worlds."

She wasn't ready to die. She wasn't ready to starve or freeze or be murdered or float through an endless Void until she wasted away, but Loki's chin was dipping in a shallow nod of acknowledgement and she knew that, like he'd said, there was no certainty. Anything was possible. They could make it home, but they could also die. And it was so terrifying to think that all their struggles, all their fighting, all their efforts might be for nothing.
"But it will not be our grave." Startled, Jane looked up with wide eyes to see the unadulterated confidence weaving through Loki's entire being like a tangible thing. "It won't." He briefly caught her fingertips, ran a thumb across her knuckles. "Wait for my signal."

And then he was gone.

The snow swallowed him almost instantly. Black and green faded to white, but no amount of squinting helped her see through the worsening snowstorm. How was she supposed to wait for his signal when she couldn't see farther than twenty yards? Even if she did somehow know when to run, how was she going to stay on track? The last thing she needed was to end up lost and alone in a Jötunheim blizzard.

Jane cupped her hands around her eyes hoping that would help. It didn't. With a frustrated growl, she flattened her back to the boulder and scanned the vicinity for any sign of the frost giants. Nothing. She was still in the middle of debating whether or not to just make a break for it when a sliver of green flashed through the white.

It was a beacon, her very own guiding light, and she sprinted in spite of the raw ache in her legs and lungs. After everything else, she refused to let a few sore muscles bring her down. The closer she got, the brighter it shone, and the brighter it shone, the more she was inspired to run faster, harder.

She was going to make it.

She had to make it.

And she would have made it... if not for the enormous shape that burst from the expanse to her left with a wicked snarl and sent her flying.

The world was a smear, all white on white on white. Even after skidding to a stop – people always thought snow was soft, but Jane could verify that it absolutely was not – she had trouble distinguishing one direction from the other. If gravity hadn't plastered her to the ground, she might as well have been suspended in a bleached sea.

It was the vibrant flecks on the snow that eventually brought her back. Drops appeared one by one, and it took her a moment to realize she was the source. Jane swiped the back of her hand across her mouth only for it to come away crimson. A nosebleed. One of a few injuries if the dull pain at her hairline and the viscous liquid seeping towards her eyebrow were anything to go by.

Spitting blood from her mouth, she staggered to her feet. She strained to hear something, anything that would tell her where to go, but all she could hear was the wind howling. Or was it just the wind? Everything had happened too fast to know for sure, but whatever had collided with her had been growling, furry, and...

Jane snatched the dagger from the surcoat pocket where she'd stashed it just in time to slash at the animal that lunged from the wall of white.

Teeth snapped somewhere near her head, bristly fur mashed against her face, and suddenly she was in the snow again. Adrenaline flooded her system. That, and something that felt a lot like instinct. Using the momentum from the attack, Jane rolled to her feet and into a defensive stance, knees bent, arms up, dagger at the ready.

Eyes intense and focused, fur a few shades darker than the rest of their surroundings, canines bared in a snarl... it was a wolf. But at nearly seven feet tall and sporting a blue and brown molded harness, it could only be one of the frost giant's winter hounds.
A combined yell and roar from behind answered the question of where the wolf's rider was.

It also meant Loki was preoccupied and she was on her own.

Adjusting her hold on the dagger, Jane shuffled a half-step closer to the animal. There wouldn't be any help this time around. This battle was all up to her. But she could do it. She knew she could. Could feel it in the way her breathing evened out and the silent anticipation in her muscles, her sure grip on the hilt and the calmness that settled at her core.

The wolf lunged again, and Jane dodged to the side, snaking out one arm so the dagger could carve a clean line from the beast's snout to the base of its skull. It roared and flung itself around, but she was already backpedaling. Her second jab clipped a tooth, another missed completely. Dull claws raked her arm, and she responded with a sharp thrust into the wolf's exposed chest.

Warmth splashed over her arm as she lurched away. Some of it splattered onto her face too. Her lips tasted like copper and her inhales smelled like death, but the wolf wasn't dead. Not yet. And quicker than she could react, it dove and sank its teeth into her leg.

Jane screamed.

And screamed.

And screamed.

But while she screamed she fought. She beat her fist against the wolf's head, clawed at its lips and teeth and snout with her nails, plunged the dagger over and over and over again into its eye until there was nothing but a gooey mess in the socket and muffled yelping coming from around her leg. Then she kept stabbing until there wasn't even that.

"Jane…"

With one arm around her shoulders, Loki guided her hand from where it was half-buried in the wolf's skull to her lap. She sat there in shock, looking vacantly between her upturned palms and the wolf that lay crumpled beside her, motionless in snow that had been stained pink-grey, red, and yellow. The jagged holes in her leg stung when Loki touched them.

"It isn't enough, but it is the best I can do right now." He stood and extended a hand. "Come on, we aren't finished yet."

Continuing to stare down at her lap, Jane couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so uncomfortable, not with a situation or circumstances so much as with herself. Her hands should've been shaking, but they weren't. Not that that meant very much. They hadn't been shaking when she'd stabbed the frost giant in Munnr Død either.

But there was no time to wait.

"Jane, get up!"

More howling was already kicking up in the distance.

They hadn't been far from the rock – it had only taken a few minutes for them to reach the base – and
the climb wasn't overly difficult in itself – a natural groove sculpted into one side provided a makeshift path to the top – but they were both weak, hampered by injuries.

Jane's wound was improved. Instead of deep punctures, there were now only faint depressions. However, she still winced with every stretch to reach a foothold, gritted her teeth whenever the stone scraped her torn skin. And Loki wasn't much better, having sustained a new slice across the top of his shoulder that caused a spreading stain down the back of his tunic. The gash on his side had reopened as well.

What a pair they made, leaning a little too heavily on each other at times, relying on a push here and a hand there to make it over the precipice, lying flat on their backs beside each other panting with exertion, exhaustion, and blood loss. What a pathetic picture they must have cut.

Loki was the first to stand, and Jane appraised the dark smudge left behind on the stone for only a second before following. Up on the rock, the wind was intensified. It battered them mercilessly while snow swirled in a blinding mess. From beneath the arm thrown above her eyes, though, she could just make out the end of Jötunheim in front of them, the beginning of Gröf Miðli.

"Is this it?" Jane's feet carried her forward of their own accord. "This is where we're supposed to jump?"

"Yes."

Stopping a short distance from the edge, she leaned forward to see the earth fall away in a sheer drop that extended as far as she could see to the left and right. Beyond the rock, the air was still. No wind, no snow, no clouds… just the limitless expanse of space studded with stars. She reached out an experimental hand and felt the difference crossing the boundary made, ice-cold wind on her wrist compared to temperate stillness on her fingertips.

"Lie-Smith…"

The voice was completely unexpected. Higher, lilting, singsong in its teasing quality… it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, melding with the wind so there was no way of knowing where it had originated. Goosebumps immediately broke out across Jane's skin as she jerked back her arm.

"Where else do you plan to run? Into Gröf Miðli to die? I think not."

"We must go now." Loki's whisper was virtually inaudible in the wind, but his intentions were clear when he smoothly spun, grabbed her wrist, and hauled her towards the edge. "Don't think, just—"

A sheet of ice rose from the rock without warning. It ran along the entire perimeter, blocking off all sight of Gröf Miðli, and extended up into the sky where it disappeared in the clouds. Loki spun again sharply, lip curling as a cruel laugh danced through the air.

"If only it were so easy. Even if you fared the Void, you have created too many enemies. Can you feel them, Laufeyson? They are closing in around you, tightening the net."

"Very well, Skaði, you have my attention." Without looking, Loki began to ease Jane around until she was sheltered between his back and the ice. "What is it you want?"

"Revenge."

The smile laced through Skaði's voice was accentuated by a series of low whoops and howls from various directions, and Jane shuffled impossibly closer in response, molding herself to Loki's spine like she could disappear into him if she only tried hard enough.
"There is a blood debt between you and I that can only be paid with your death. And you will pay. I want to feel your flesh give way beneath my hands. I want to pull out your organs piece by piece. I will take apart everything you are and put you back together so that I may do it again."

"And yet you hide in the shadows." Jane's hands fistled into Loki's tunic went ignored. "I wonder if Jötunheim's new queen will always be so inspiring."

The change in atmosphere was palpable. It twisted, deepened. Even the wind seemed to take on a new level of roughness. Calling the mood strained would be an understatement when disquiet was a blanket over their shoulders, a disease slinking through their veins.

"What the hell are you doing?" Poking one of the few unbloodied spots she could find, Jane stretched onto her tiptoes to hiss in his ear. "Are you trying to get us both killed?"

They were close enough to that already.

They didn't need any help.

"I cannot fight that which I cannot see." Loki's head canted her way, but his eyes never stopped scanning for the frost giants. "I need Skaði in the open, and what better way to do so than to speak to her pride. There's more than one way to fight a battle."

"Or you could make the first move and take her by surprise. She can't see in this any better than we can." Both plans were valid, but there was something far more appealing about being preemptive.

"And leave you unprotected?"

Jane was still trying to process Loki's unwillingness to leave her alone and at the mercy of whatever happened upon her when a shadow materialized in the midst of the snowstorm. Then another. And another. One by one they appeared until Jane and Loki were trapped between an impassable ice wall and a semi-circle of five – no, six – frost giants.

"If you call upon the queen..." All of the giants lingered farther off. All but one. The voice that had been echoing eerily in the wind centered, narrowing in on the indistinct shape gradually taking form. "She will answer."

Finally, Jane had a face to pair with the name.

Skaði sported the characteristic cobalt skin and red eyes of her race. However, the similarities ended there. Piecemeal fur skins provided the barest of clothing while white hair adorned with a variety of beads and small bones swirled in a tangled mess about her head. She was short for a frost giant, less than a foot taller than Loki, but radiated a fierceness that made her rank understandable.

"Surrender and the Midgardian's death will be a quick one." Lifting a bone-handled machete, Skaði pointed it with a crooked smirk. "Resist and you will not find me so merciful."

Loki vanished without warning.

Or rather, his body mass did.

The sudden loss of support left Jane wavering, hands falling in gold trails through the mirror image left behind. She was regarding his double in awe when she heard it. A sharp crack, an exclamation that trailed off into a wet gurgle… then Loki was back, as real and tangible and solid beneath her hands as before.
Skaði whirled towards the noises just as the two frost giants on the outermost ends crumpled. The remaining three automatically edged inward, away from their slain companions, but Skaði merely threw back her head and laughed, completely unperturbed that two of her warriors were now dead.

"Oh, very good! Leniency can be such a bore. Your defiance makes things far more interesting." The machete glinted white when she twirled it. "It is only a shame the sons of Muspel will not be able to bear witness to your end when they have hunted you for so long."

"Quite the opposite…" Without looking, Loki gently pushed Jane back against the ice. "It is a shame there are not more of you here to make this fight worthwhile."

The words had barely left his mouth when he disappeared again.

This time, he didn't bother leaving a doppelganger.

One of the frost giants roared in agony while another growled in challenge. Both fell quickly, though, and the shadow in the snowstorm that was Loki continued on to the third. But instead of going to her remaining companion's aid, Skaði simply circled the dueling pair like an animal waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

"You think you can escape fate, Lie-Smith?" Jane hunkered down, wedged herself into the fissure where ice met snow, tried to be invisible while Skaði's loop brought her too close for comfort. "Whatever course you choose, you will die. It is inevitable."

"Really." There was a thick sound followed by a thump as the last frost giant's head landed in the snow. "And how is that?"

"Ragnarök."

Skaði continued on her unhurried, purposeful loop, and Jane breathed a quiet sigh of relief. The farther away she was from any of the frost giants, the better. Loki, on the other hand, was completely still. If not for the wind ruffling his clothes and hair, he might have been a statue. Blinking away the buildup of snow from her eyelashes, Jane glanced uncertainly between them, well near suffocating on the pressure-dense air.

When Loki finally moved, it was to nonchalantly wipe the flat of the daggers he wielded on his pants. "You believe the end of the gods draws near." He sounded wholly unconvinced. "You do not?"

There was no forewarning, no hitched inhale or subtle twitch to give away their thoughts, nothing to suggest what was to come. One minute Skaði and Loki were calmly facing each other; the next, they were locked in combat, steel meeting steel with a grating screech.

They repeatedly came together and separated, charged and dodged, clashed and ducked and reeled. Where Thor's battle with the Destroyer had been one of brute force, theirs hinged on agility, and Jane, nearly hidden in the growing snowdrift, observed the deadly dance in morbid fascination. They were incredible to watch in the same way volcanoes or tornadoes were amazing and devastating all at the same time.

"The stories tell of the trickster being secured beneath one of the great serpents of Jötunheim." Deflecting a thrust, Skaði forced Loki into a backbend to avoid the slash aimed at his neck. "That the very foundations of Yggdrasil would tremble with his struggles and, upon his release, Ragnarök would begin."
"Those are Midgard's accounts, not our own."

Loki caught her downward stroke in his crossed daggers, and Skaði leaned forward in the momentary pause. "And yet you would discount something that foretold your situation so precisely?"

"You orchestrated the events of Munnr Død with those tales in mind." With a grunt, he shoved her back, slammed the hilt of one dagger into her nose, and used the distraction to bury the other in her side. "That is not fate."

A fresh wave of snow obscured the fight when Loki, riding that momentum, forced Skaði to the ground. The blizzard had already made it difficult to see. Now it was virtually impossible. A shrill whistle sounded from within the whiteout, and Jane squinted into the mess, desperate to see something, anything.

But what she finally spotted almost made her wish she hadn't searched in the first place.

Less than ten yards to her right emerged one of the frost giants' winter hounds. Its head was lowered, body tense, muzzle crinkled in a snarl. Knowing she'd already been spotted, Jane's stomach dropped. Killing the first wolf had felt more like luck than skill. Muster a repeat performance would be unlikely.

"And the human, then?" Jane's eyes cut to the side. The flurry had cleared enough to reveal Loki bending above Skaði, who looked far too at ease for someone with a knife pressed to their throat. "What of her?"

Loki twisted the dagger still rooted in Skaði's side. "What of her?"

"You kill for her, you protect her, you offer your very life for her..." Pain garbled Skaði's words but did nothing to dampen her sneer. "How much more would you be willing to sacrifice?"

It was as if the question were a verbal cue. A savage growl ripped from the wolf, breaking the short-lived impasse, and in the split-second before Jane started back to attention, she saw Loki's head snap up, saw him take in her predicament with a sort of awful realization.

The wolf leaped...

Jane staggered backwards through the snow, Gerðr's blade extended...

And with the force equivalent to crashing into a brick wall, the wolf slammed against her chest, simultaneously knocking the dagger from her hand, the wind from her lungs, and her feet out from under her.

Landing with a muffled oomph, Jane sunk deep in the snow. Rank breath washed over her face as the bones in her ankle crushed beneath the weight of a paw, and no matter where she looked, a mouthful of teeth always seemed to be in the way. She attempted to call for help — for Loki — but it came out as a strangled wheeze that was swallowed by the gaping maw no more than six inches from her face.

She'd just resigned herself to a rather disappointing death — being mauled while on the brink of getting home was so anticlimactic after everything else she'd survived — when the wolf was yanked away and eviscerated before her eyes.

"Loki..."

He stood over the carcass still twitching with death, head bent, jaw clenched, chest heaving. His
arms were coated to the elbow in the wolf's blood, and his tunic clung to a fresh weal across his lower back. Between the injuries he'd given and the injuries he'd sustained, his entire being was predominantly red.

When no response came, Jane tried again. "Loki?"

Watching Loki come back to himself was like watching a puzzle being fit together, each jigsaw piece sliding neatly into place. But even after he'd knelt in front of her, the look in his eyes made him a stranger. There was a darkness to him, a dangerous edge that made a chill skitter down her spine. Those who had labeled him the God of Mischief must have never seen him like this. Right then, there was nothing mischievous about him.

And yet…

He caught her chin in his hand, gave her a thorough once-over to check for wounds, rubbed his thumb across her cheek in a decidedly non-dangerous way.

"Sacrificing a sure kill for the sake of one woman… I believed as much." Skaði stood to their right, but neither Jane nor Loki so much as glanced her way. "Many of Midgard's tales might be contrived, fanciful, but it seems there are some that are of substance. This human is your Sigyn, no?"

Something tapped at the back of Jane's brain. "Sigyn?"

But there was something slightly off about the way the name tasted on her tongue, and she unconsciously frowned at Loki, lost in thought. Memories of sitting before the fireplace in Erik's study listening to him recount the stories of his childhood danced through Jane's mind, blurring away the grey-green eyes opposite her.

And the Æsir took his son's entrails and bound Loki with them over the three stones. Then Skaði took a venomous serpent and fastened it up over him, so that the venom should drip from the serpent into his face. But Sigyn, his wife, stood near him and held a basin so that it might catch the venom.

Breath coming a little faster, Jane touched her fingertips to those still holding her chin. Loki hadn't been bound with his son's entrails. Neither had he been stretched over three stones beneath the snake. But someone had stood near him in those last minutes in Munnr Død, someone who had caught the drops of venom in a hollowed-out skull…

Her.

"I saw the skull, Lie-Smith. I know what she did for you. You can claim I arranged your punishment to mimic the tales, despite my having used the serpents since the dawn of the ages…” Skaði crossed to stand somewhere behind Jane. "But can you explain away your human's actions?"

The wind was unrelenting, its bite acute and merciless. Jane's nose, ears, and fingers had long since gone numb while tears smarted and froze in the corners of her eyes. Nothing could hide Loki's face, though. Beneath the streaks of red, he was ghostly pale. What she couldn't decide was whether it stemmed from all Skaði's talk of Ragnarök or from…

"Who led her to you from Útgardr? Who kept her by your side? Who informed her that the skull would protect you from the venom? It was not I."

Sigyn.

"There are things at work beyond our control."
No, not Sigyn…

"Fate has spoken."

It was there, a crack in that which had been impenetrable for so long, a thin stream of light shining like dawn through the pitch-black of her mind.

"The twilight of the gods has begun."

"Signe."

It didn't even qualify as a whisper – a whisper of a whisper, perhaps – but Jane knew the name was right in the same way she knew a thousand and one other things without fault. And if she'd had any doubts, they were dashed when Loki's fingers twitched and the little bit of color that remained in his face drained away.

Something shifted in the wind, and Loki blinked from existence. Jane heard the scrape of steel on steel in the background, jeering challenges, taunting insults, but didn't move, just stared straight ahead at nothing and everything. Even when the fight skidded by and showered her with snow, she remained motionless.

A once fluid skirmish had been reduced to disjointed flashes, fragmented pieces of a whole – blood flew in a graceful arc; Skaði skipped nimbly into view, then out again; Loki followed, close on her heels; someone grunted in pain; more blood painted the snow; someone else growled in anger – but it seemed so inconsequential when she couldn't think, couldn't breathe.

Then again, that also might have been due to the brief tug that originated somewhere in the empty space between her lungs.

"… will not hold Skaði for long. Come on."

Jane was hauled unceremoniously to her feet. In a daze, she allowed herself to be led to the wall where she watched Loki press a hand to the ice and melt away a section large enough for them to walk through. Stars glimmered brightly through the doorway. One of those was the Milky Way, was Earth, was home.

But before they took that leap…

"Who is she?" Poised on the brink of Jötunheim, Loki went still at the question, and Jane could literally see the muscles in his back go rigid. "Am I her?" She closed what little space there was between them, reached out to lightly touch his uninjured shoulder. "Am I… Signe?"

"Now is not the time."

"I am, aren't I?" Another twitch flared through her core, firm enough to cause a wince of discomfort but not firm enough to fully distract. "Is that the name you knew me by?"

"You will insist on this discussion now, Jane?" The emphasis he placed on her name did not go unnoticed. "Now, when time is of the essence?"

"I have to know." Jane clambered through the snow to stand before him. "Please, I need to know about me… about us."

Conflict warred through the hard angles of Loki's expression, a blend of bitterness and agony. "The only thing you need to know is that we are finished. Anything we might have once shared has long
since been destroyed."

"I don't believe that, not for an instant." Jane leaned in stubbornly. "And to be honest, it's a little insulting you expect me to after everything that's happened."

"Let this go, Jane."

"No!" With a shaky exhale, she blew out her frustration. "Look, something obviously went wrong between us. I get that. But it doesn't have to stay that way. Stop trying to shut me out so we can take this chance we've been—"

"Chance? Chance? You think this is about chance?" Loki grabbed her arms, spun her away from the precipice, and shook her. "Luck did not send Thor to you in his banishment. Neither did it bring you to Asgard or the Bi-Frost or Jötunheim."

"So we're back to that again." Despite the ire slowly overtaking his features, Jane tilted her head and gave him a dubious look. "What is it with you Asgardians and fate?"

"It was fate." Loki's hands slid up her arms. "It has always been fate." They ghosted over her shoulders, up to her neck. "It will always be fate." And when he cupped her face, outlining her jaw with his thumbs, her breath hitched. "Fate ripped us apart as easily as it once brought us together."

Jane's attention darted from his eyes to his mouth and back again, throat tight. "What if it's fate bringing us together now?"

Everything faded from Loki's features, all the anger and frustration and confusion melting into one singular expression: an empty sort of brokenness. Loki was lost. In himself, in the world... it didn't matter which. All she knew was that he was adrift, alone in the most painful way, and that she couldn't reach him unless he stopped holding her at a figurative arm's length.

"Fate, it would seem..." Loki stepped back, hands falling away into loose fists at his side. "Has a different path for me in mind."

"That's why you were so bothered by those last things Skaði said about Ragnarök? Because you think one resemblance gives credence to an entire story?"

"I could have written off you catching the venom in the skull as an unlikely happenstance, but not the names. Sigyn... Signe...they're too similar." The wind blew a few stray strands of hair into his eyes when he shook his head. "It's too much. And if that part is true, then—"

"Do you feel that?"

Jane wrapped her arms around her waist, stared unseeingly at Loki's chest. It was the third time she'd felt that pull on her bones. The first time, she'd attributed it to remembering that name; the second, she'd been too caught up in the hunt for answers to give it much thought. But there was no ignoring it now. That last one had been too strong.

"Feel what?" Loki was eyeing her warily. "Jane?"

When the fourth one came, the intensity had her doubling over. It felt like she was being stretched, quartered, like the ligaments knitting her together were coming apart at the seams. In a way, it was similar to when Loki had carted her through space-time. However, where those had been slightly dizzying, this felt cruder, less refined.

Her first thought was that the Bi-Frost had been repaired. But no, the one trip she'd taken via the
Rainbow Bridge had felt even smoother than Loki's method, so that couldn't be what she was feeling now. If it wasn't her imagination and it wasn't magic and it wasn't the Bi-Frost, though, that only left…

"Erik." Jane glanced up to Loki who looked torn between running to her and running away. "He had access to my notes, all my research. He must have figured out a way to—"

The rest of her sentence eroded beneath another wave of pain. She swayed for a moment before bending over to brace her hands on her knees, sweat beading on her forehead in spite of Jötunheim's wind and freezing temperatures. It felt like she was going to pass out. Or die.

"Come with me." Loki's only response was to take another step back. "You don't have a choice. You're hurt, and you used too much of your magic in the fight. Going into the Void is too risky."

"I cannot return."

"There's no other way, Loki."

He retreated again. "You heard what Skaði said." And again. "Ragnarök has begun." And again, each step carrying him farther from her and closer to Gröf Miðli.

"It's just a stupid story." Unlike the rest, the pain of the current pull refused to wane. Nevertheless, Jane tripped after him, held out an imploring hand. "Please."

"I won't."

"You have to!"

"No!"

"You can't leave me again!"

A bomb would've had less of an effect in that moment than those five, simple words. Jane clapped the hand that had been reaching for Loki over her mouth, but whether it was to keep from vomiting up the meager contents of her stomach or more of the words that were systematically dismantling the wall in her mind, she couldn't say.

Again.

He couldn't leave her… again?

And it was again because there was a first time, another time, a time when she'd stood on a cliff that overlooked an endless sea separating the island from Sweden with ashen hair and frostbitten fingers and tear-streaked cheeks and the taste of regret like dust in her mouth and she knew.

She knew.

It was like watching a move in reverse. New Mexico, Virginia, and Canada were still there in startling clarity, but before that… Paris, Volos, Ceylon, the Scottish Highlands, St. Petersburg, Roanoke, London, Zhen'an, the Caribbean, Giza, Berlin. And before even those, there was Norway.

Norway, where her life had simultaneously ended and begun. Norway, where she'd first met…

"Loki."

Jane was kneeling in the snow with no recollection of falling. There was no room around the thousand-year whirlwind of people and places, events and names. Gasping for air, she eventually
found Loki, who was closer than before but still beyond reach. They hadn't left the realm full of dark creatures with even darker intentions, but seeing his face, taking in the features she'd memorized a thousand times over... it was like seeing the sun for the first time.

"I know you." Something unexplainable swelled in Jane's chest. "I remember."

Loki's jaw worked over itself. "You..." Then he stopped.

But the force threatening to yank her apart had no intentions of waiting for him to finish. It pulsed through her from head to foot with such ferocity that she expected to shatter from the inside out at any second.

"Come with me, Loki."

Tears hardened into crystals on Jane's cheeks. Mucus did the same on her upper lip. A myriad of wounds adorned her body, and every inch of her was smeared with blood or grime or both. Right then, she was probably the most unattractive person in any realm, but she didn't care. She was reaching for the one thing she knew, the one person she needed, pleading, begging.

And he was wavering. "Jane..." The fingers at his side twitched, the resolve faltered.

"Loki, please!"

Then the world fell out from under her.

One moment she was kneeling on the precipice of a realm no one believed was real in the bloody aftermath of a battle with frost giants; the next, she was on an empty platform in the middle of a room that was too quiet and too clean and too bright.

Jane managed a single, shallow inhale before her body gave way and crumpled forward, too overwhelmed to even care where she was. Hunching over, she pressed her forehead to the smooth tiles, swallowed, and stared blankly into the hollow at the center of her body.

Her hands were cradled there.

Her empty hands.

There was no one on the platform beside her, no hand in hers. There was only the haunting sensation of wind on her face, the memory of the fraction of an inch that had been between their fingers, the last-second image of Loki being shoved off the edge of the world and into the Void by the same energy that had wrenched her through space-time. Something deeply ancient clawed at Jane's insides. Was this what it felt like to be alive? To remember? To know?

"How about that."

"Is she...?"

"I'm registering strong vitals, doctor. She isn't dead."

"What about...?"

"No, sir. She isn't dying either."

"Well, then, it looks like someone died all over her."

"Preliminary scans show the majority of the blood to be of alien origin."
"You know, I am… genuinely surprised this worked. I feel like that's alright to say now that we have her instead of a little, green alien on that landing. Or do those even exist? I hope so. Buff and blonde are kind of a letdown as far as aliens go."

"Good god, Jane!"

"Um, yeah, we really aren't supposed to…" Something slammed loud enough to echo through the same loudspeakers the voices were coming from. "Go in there. Well, fuck."

Jane winced at the bang and stirred, bringing her hands beneath her shoulders. The tiles should've been cold beneath her palms. Instead, they felt temperate, lukewarm. Over a month in Jötunheim probably had that effect on people. She began to straighten her arms, only half-listening to the rambling voice through the speakers.

"I wasn't planning on filling out the report to start with, but now there's no way. JARVIS, I hope you're up to speed on astrophysics lingo because you'll be… oh, hey, you are alive. I was starting to wonder."

It took a moment for Jane to realize the voice was talking to her.

"Yoo-hoo. Yeah, up here." She glanced around the pristine room in a daze before a dark-haired figure in an observation room set some fifteen feet overhead caught her eye. The figure lifted a hand in greeting. "Welcome home, space cadet."

"Jane!"

Locks grated, a door flew open, and then there was Erik, wild-haired, red-eyed, and sprinting across the room. He dropped to his knees in front of her but didn't touch her, just hovered his hands over her shoulders like she'd crumble to pieces if he actually touched her. Who knew? Maybe she would.

"Don't worry, Jane, you're home."

The urge to cry suddenly welled up, and she fell forward against Erik with a choked sob, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. For a moment, he didn't move at all. Then he cautiously placed one arm around her back and brushed the opposite hand through her hair.

"You're safe."

Chapter End Notes

So… probably not what everyone expected to happen when I said Jane’s memories would return, right? I’d say I’m sorry, but yeah… I’m kind of not. You can rest assured, though. We’re rapidly closing in on the prologue, which means Jane and Loki will reunite soon enough!

Some general items of note for this chapter:

In case you haven’t noticed it by now, I love parallels. As Jane and Loki have grown closer during their time in Jötunheim, you can see them acting/reacting similarly to when they first met. I mentioned it in a couple review responses that it’s like they’re moving in circles without even realizing it. It’s what they do. Always has been; always will be. And it makes the ultimate difference when they’re arguing on the edge of a cliff with the
threat of Jane being left without Loki yet again. End of Sweden Part II, anyone?

Also, Jane might have looked past the fact that Loki melted through that ice wall blocking the void, but don’t think for a moment that she forgot about it completely. In the Útgarðar chapter, Gerðr said that ice created by a frost giant can only be dissolved by a frost giant. Jane’s a smart girl; she’ll connect those dots once things calm down.

Which also kind of plays into the mythological side of this story because once Jane realizes Loki is a frost giant – just like the Prose and Poetic Edda always said – and puts that together with what they went through in Jötunheim – including the debate of Sigyn vs Signe – will she be so keen to dismiss everything as just ages-old tales? Fate vs free will, people. In the end, that’s what this story is about.

And who was expecting Tony Stark? Remember Jane’s comment back in the Willowsdale chapter about her research grant coming from a privately-funded facility out of California? Yeah. Tony Stark has been at least mildly interested in her research for a while now. Or it might have been a recommendation from Pepper because we all know she’s the real boss.

Wow, that was a lot of notes.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
2012: Washington D.C., United States

Chapter Notes

I’m here, I’m here! And still alive! I was going to set time aside to respond to all your reviews, but I figured you’d rather just have the next chapter instead since it’s been way too long. Forgive me? If I get a few minutes this weekend, I’ll try to go back and tackle them. If I don’t, please know that I appreciate every single one!

I did have a guest reviewer wonder about the story’s title, though, and wanted to share. “The Writing On The Wall” is meant to be a reference to the main theme of this story: fate versus free will. Essentially, it’s questioning whether a person’s future is a result of their own actions or if it’s already set in stone. Is everything already writing on the wall, so to speak? Hope that makes sense!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I remember how seeing the shape of your mouth that first time, I kept staring until my blood turned to rain. Some things take root in the brain and just don’t let go.”

2012: Washington D.C., United States

Jane fidgeted in the chair, uncrossed and re-crossed her legs, and pretended to read the magazine in her lap instead of peeking at the clock yet again. It felt like fifteen minutes had passed, but it couldn't have been more than a couple. Time was, quite literally, dragging. Realizing that she'd been staring at the same article since arriving, she flipped the page.

When the receptionist dropped something behind her desk, a baby that had been contentedly sleeping across the room began to cry. Jane watched the mother rock him – if the blue onesie wasn't a giveaway, the baseball stitched onto the front with the words Lil' Slugger was – and smiled reassuringly at the woman's apologetic expression.

Crying gradually lowered to half-hearted snuffling and then drowsy sighs before the baby went silent altogether, leaving the arching violin in Vivaldi’s Four Seasons as the only sound in the waiting room once more.

"Ms. Foster?" An assistant in a navy blue dress suit stood in the doorway. "Dr. Bishop will see you now."

Tossing the unread magazine onto the side table, Jane gratefully stood and followed the woman – her name was Miranda; or was it Melissa? – down the hallway, around a corner, and to a pair of heavy, wooden doors. She distractedly noted the brass nameplate had been redone since her last visit as she
entered the room, the door clicking shut behind her.

"Welcome back, Jane. Please, have a seat."

With a shallow nod, Jane crossed to the indicated chaise lounge. The plaque wasn't the only thing that had been updated. The lounge's upholstery had been redone as well, this time in expensive leather. It was absurdly soft beneath her hands, even softer than... swallowing hard, she deliberately stopped that train of thought before it went too far and sat down.

At nearly six-four with the build of a heavyweight wrestler, Dr. Nathaniel Bishop was a bear of a man. People instinctively gave him a wide berth, skirting him in narrow hallways and second-guessing their elevator options. And if his size wasn't enough to draw one's attention, his disposition was. He had a confident, steady sort of demeanor that commanded an entire room.

But all traces of intimidation ended the minute he opened his mouth because he had a wide, genuine smile with teeth that shone brightly against his dark skin and a deep voice that could lull even the most hard-hearted person to relaxation.

"It's been a while. A couple years now, at least. I trust you've been well?"

"I have." Jane melted into the chair. "And you?"

"Still recovering from the holiday season. My in-laws decided to take their time returning to Michigan. They only left last week." Gathering his materials, he crossed from behind the desk to a high-backed chair to her left. "I'm not sure who was happier to see them off, myself or Angela."

The framed picture of a woman and two children perched on a bookshelf caught her eye. "She looks great. The kids, too. How old are they now?"

"Eight and five and a handful, the both of them. Chris thinks he's invincible and can do anything, and Shannon does whatever big brother does, which gets her into trouble more often than not. It's a miracle we've only had one broken bone."

Jane imagined the kids climbing trees and smiled. "So they're taking after you, then?"

"Since when has thrill-seeking ever been included in the same sentence as my name?" Crossing an ankle over the opposite knee, he glanced fondly up to the picture. "No, that's all Angela in them."

"Well, I'm happy for you, Nate. It looks like you've done well."

Jane had first met Nate through the physics department at Culver University. Already wrapping up his graduate degree and preparing to take the MCAT by that point, he'd offered to help her through some of the humanities electives required as part of the university's liberal arts classification. In return, she'd tutored him through some of the more hairy sections of advanced mathematics.

They'd bonded over late-night study sessions and cheap coffee.

In the end, though, life happened. Nate graduated, opened his own practice, got married, had kids, while Jane obtained her masters, then her doctorate, and received a position in Culver's research department. They drifted apart, as most people did. However, when the time came that Erik insisted – refused to take no for an answer, really – she see someone about her still-absent memories – a therapist, a psychiatrist, anyone – needless to say, she knew exactly who to call.

"Thank you." Nate slipped a pair of reading glasses onto the bridge of his nose with a smile and began to write. "But what about you? I take it you didn't schedule this appointment just to catch up."
"No, I didn't." Though, it was nice to experience something normal for a change.

"Marlene indicated this would be your last visit."

She'd been wrong on both counts. The woman's name was Marlene. "Yes, it will." Folding her hands in her lap, Jane settled more comfortably into the chaise lounge and stared at the embossed metal tiles that made up the ceiling.

"Please know you're under no obligation to answer…" Nate was choosing his words carefully, struggling to walk the tightrope between professional and friend. "But may I ask why?"

"Because I've remembered."

The pen's scratching stopped abruptly, and Jane could feel the weight of his stare, the way his eyes snapped up over the rim of his glasses. "You've remembered what, exactly?"

Her lips quirked in a slight grin as she breathed her answer. "Everything." Then she let her head fall to the side. "I remember all of it."

"I see." There was a tightness to the set of Nate's mouth, a dead giveaway of just how desperately he wanted more details, so it was a testament to his skill as a psychiatrist when he visibly gathered himself before returning to the notepad once more. "And this happened in the time since our last visit?"

"Yes." Jane's gaze wandered back to the ceiling. "It actually happened about a month ago."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

Would she like to talk about it? That was one she hadn't heard yet. For the past thirty-two and a half days, her life had been a nonstop stream of people in dark suits or lab coats repeating explain this or tell me about that. Jane understood the draw from a scientific perspective. Irrefutable evidence of previously unknown worlds, a first-hand witness to the realm, and a newfound method of bridging the space between said realms… it was an astrophysicist's dream. She would've acted the same way if the roles were reversed.

They weren't, though, and the constant demands had begun to grate on her nerves. No one even seemed to bother with how she was handling the fallout of what happened. Of course, that wasn't entirely true. Erik had asked repeatedly. So had Darcy, who had also nearly tackled her in an uncharacteristic hug the minute she'd walked through the door. And she wanted to answer them and get everything off her chest, wanted to so badly it was an almost physical hurt.

There was just one problem.

How could she?

Jane released the hem of her shirt and smoothed away the wrinkle she'd set into the fabric with her preoccupied folding. "It's a long story."

"There's still fifty minutes left in your session."

"And somewhat confusing."

"I'm sure I can keep up."

"And I doubt you'd believe me even if I told you."
"Try me."

Arching a brow, Jane peeked to the side. "Since when did therapists become so pushy? Aren't you just supposed to ask how that made me feel?"

"You've been watching too much television." However, Nate made a big show of cleaning his glasses and sliding them back on before fixing her with a thoughtful gaze. "So how does that make you feel, Jane?"

She snorted. "Very funny."

"In all seriousness, though, this isn't something to just dismiss. I'm sure you've recovered good memories, but it might have brought along some unpleasant ones as well, maybe resolution to a few long-unanswered questions."

Further elaboration wasn't necessary. They'd spent too many sessions circling the issues of why no one claimed to know her and how she'd seemingly blinked into existence with no past whatsoever for her not to understand Nate's inference. And with her deliberately withholding information, it was no wonder he thought the answers might be troubling. In a way, they were.

So she should talk about it, probably needed to for the sake of her own sanity.

But…

"I just wanted to come here and tell you in person why I wouldn't be coming back anymore."
Swinging her legs over the side of the chaise lounge, Jane ignored Nate's dubious expression as he closed the notebook. "I'm fine, Nate. Really."

And it came out assuredly enough that she was almost able to convince herself.

"No sign of Thunder Buns?"

Using her shoulder to hold the phone in place, Jane gathered up the various Chinese take-out boxes and shoved them into the nearest trash can. "Can we stop talking about Thor?"

"Considering we haven't even started talking about him yet, that's got to be the easiest request I've had all week."

"It's only Monday."

"A great start, right?"

"It's only Monday morning."

"That probably helps too." Graciously provided by S.H.I.E.L.D. for her visit to Willowsdale, the hotel room was top of the line, and Jane fumbled for a way to lower the volume on the television considering there was no remote in sight. She'd just given up, unplugged the whole device, and moved on to her overnight bag when Darcy drawled out her next question. "How about any signs from space?"

Jane paused in the middle of rummaging through her carryon in search of pajamas. "Darcy, that's
basically the same question."

"No, it's not." When a telling silence descended, Darcy insisted emphatically. "It's not! Space is everything out there. It's other realms. What do you always say? Dimensional space-time something or other…"

"A four-dimensional continuum that comprises the properties of space-time and can be traversed via Einstein-Rosen bridges."

"A little wordy, but yeah. And it's something people like to study and look at every night. Not all people, of course, but people like you and Erik." If the comment had come from anyone but the intern, it might have been offensive. "Anyway, that's space. Thor is a muscly god who just happens to be from space. Though, incidentally, he would also be nice to study and look at every night."

Jane sighed. "Darcy…"

"But my point…" The louder interruption drowned out anything else that might have been said. "Is that they're two very different questions."

"Fine, ok, you're right. They're not the same question." Flipping on the bathroom light, Jane tossed her pajamas onto the counter and started the shower. "But the answer is."

"So you really haven't seen or heard anything?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Well damn." Darcy huffed in disappointment. "You know, I really expected him to come back, especially after your little evening rendezvous on the rooftop. If it'll cheer you up, you can tell me what happened that night."

With a snort, Jane began to peel off her clothes. "I didn't realize I was upset." She juggled the phone between hands as she shimmied out of her shirt. "Or that there was anything to tell."

"Did you two make out?"

"Oh my god, we are not having this conversation."

"So it was more than that?"

"Everything we did was purely academic."

"Well I hope you got a chance to study his Mew-Mew."

"If you don't stop, I'm going to hang up."

"And by study his Mew-Mew, I mean—"

"Goodbye, Darcy."

"No, no, no! Wait, Jane! I'll stop, I promise!" The yell was so loud that Jane jerked away automatically, only bringing the phone back to her ear after Darcy continued in a voice several decibels lower. "Nothing more about Thor. We'll talk about something else. Me, if you want. We can talk about…" And the amount of revulsion she managed to inject into a single word was impressive. "School."

Jane bit the inside of her cheek to keep from chuckling. It was still tempting, the urge to hang up. Not
so much because of Darcy and her questions but because she'd been ridiculously tense lately. More than tense, really. Distracted. Unfocused. It wasn't like her at all, and she didn't enjoy it. The idea of standing beneath the massaging shower head until her skin was red and her fingers pruney was far more appealing.

But she didn't hang up. Instead, she leaned on the counter, propping her chin in her hand. "Alright then, what kind of trouble did you get into while I was gone?"

"Does it have to be about school?"

Jane's laugh wasn't so easily stifled the second time around. "No."

"Good because that would've been boring as hell." Shuffling sounded from the other end of the line, followed by a thump that was most likely Darcy flopping onto her couch. "First things first, I guess… I never told you what happened after Thunder Buns whooshed you away, did I?"

"Erik said the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents flew both of you to the Triskelion."

"They took Erik to the Triscuit—"

"Triskelion."

"But I managed to convince the agent watching me to make a detour after we landed." Darcy paused once to make sure her audience was listening. "To a restaurant." Then again for added effect. "With a bar."

Jane's elbow slipped into the sink. "Darcy Lewis, you're shameless."

"In my defense, I really was hungry."

"Hungry for him, maybe." Grabbing the nearest hand towel, Jane folded and placed it on the condensation-slick counter before returning to her previous position. "You probably got him fired."

"Not yet. Or I don't think so." Darcy hummed nonchalantly. "If I did, he's in denial because he still wears his business suits every day, which I'm not going to complain about because he looks good in them."

"It's nice to know your first reaction to seeing me disappear to another realm is to pick up a guy. What would your mother say?"

"Probably congratulations since she's wanted grandkids since the beginning of time. But before you get all judgmental, you should know that Scott is a genuinely nice guy. We've been seeing each other for a month now and he's…"

Jane shook her head in a combination of amusement and exasperation as Darcy rambled on about Scott, adjusting to life in D.C., and a paper the professor who had taken over her internship in Jane's absence was forcing her to write. It all sounded very dramatic – a talent of Darcy's – but Jane found her attention wandering when the conversation circled back to Scott once more.

Straightening up, she palmed away the condensation that had fogged the mirror and stared at her smeared reflection. Brown eyes and hair, freckle on one cheek, smooth skin, even teeth, a faint scar along the jawbone… it was the exact same face she'd looked at for the past thousand years.

Except for where it wasn't.
Jane leaned forward, turned her chin to either side, and took in her copy with a scrutinizing gaze. Not a single thing about her appearance had changed from the moment her teeth pierced the flesh of the Íðunn apple, but there was change now. The difference wasn't very noticeable or probably even detectable to anyone but herself. Nevertheless, it was there.

It was like the slow spread of cream in coffee, sliding underneath the surface of her skin, hiding behind her eyes. Exposure to humanity’s foulest deeds and the endless drag of the ages had tarnished any naïveté she’d once had, but this edge was something new entirely. Labelling it was impossible. It wasn't loss or nostalgia or even despondency. If forced to choose, the sentiment fell somewhere closer to apathy, and it occurred to her quite suddenly how alone she felt.

The steam rolling over the shower curtain caused the condensation to bead and trail down the mirror, and Jane sought her reflection in the clear lines left in their wake. She'd always imagined the return of her memories to be a good thing. And they were. But at the same time they weren't because they'd left her just as isolated as she'd been before.

Before the events of Jötunheim, she'd been alone in her mind.

Now she was alone out of necessity.

How could she possibly tell anyone – even the people she cared for and trusted most – the truth? Kidnapping, imprisonment, surviving in the wilderness, and fleeing the frost giants were relatively easy topics to delve into. But what about the rest? How was she supposed to explain she was from the Viking Age with explicit knowledge of the realms, personal experience dealing with magic, and was immortal because she'd once eaten an apple given to her by Loki, the God of Mischief and assailant of Puente Antiguo, with whom she'd also carried on an intimate relationship?

It was an unending cycle. To bring up one point created a question that could only be answered by another point which led to another question and so on and so forth, and it would only continue because everything was so fully intertwined it was virtually impossible to separate one thing from the next. In the end, her life was a tangled web of history, lore, and Loki.

And so she was sequestered in limbo.

Different circumstances, same isolated feeling.

Traces of Darcy's story gradually began to filter through, and when the words connected enough to snatch her attention, Jane blinked in surprise, the bathroom clicking back into place around her.

"What did you say?"

"Chocolate, Jane. He gave me chocolate. There were literally hundreds of things he could've done, but he chose the most predictable one. Not to mention—"

"No, not that." Spinning around, Jane stared unseeingly at the shower curtain. "You said something about Erik."

"Yeah, he kept going on about some scientific breakthrough while I was trying to tell Scott that he was pigeonholing me." Darcy growled in frustration. "God, I hate stereotypes. Give a girl chocolate when she's upset, like that will make me forget what—"

"What kind of breakthrough?"

"That stuff he's been working on for the past couple months. Oh, but get this—"

"What stuff?"
"The research on all those space-time inconsistencies, I guess. So then Scott—"

"What inconsistencies?"

"The ones responsible for the readings he's been getting. He comes up to me and—"

"What readings?"

There was a long, drawn out silence from the other end of the line before Darcy continued in a
deadpan voice. "You know, I really think you're missing the point of my story, Jane. And I don't
know why you're acting so surprised. It's not like Erik kept this a secret from you."

Jane froze, mouth snapping closed with an audible click and knuckles going white from her
tightened grip on the phone. When vitality returned, she turned off the shower, grabbed her clothes, and tossed her bag onto the bed on her way out of the bathroom.

"He did tell you about it, right?"

But she didn't respond because she was preoccupied with pulling on her jeans one-handed and
flipping through the hotel's directory of numbers in search of the closest airport.

"Jane?"

The flight from Willowsdale to D.C. was relatively short. The ride back to headquarters in the
professional-sleek, deep-tinted, S.H.I.E.L.D.-provided vehicle was even shorter. It felt long, but that
was all in her head because the chauffer deposited her on the steps of the Triskelion at the same time
most everyone else was arriving to start their work day.

Standing on the sidewalk, Jane spotted Erik almost immediately. He emerged from the midst of a
large group of uniformed S.H.I.E.L.D. employees heading the opposite direction, apologizing
profusely even as he shoved through them and jogged her way.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd decided to take a red-eye? I would've picked you up from—"

Jane stopped him mid-stride with a stern look. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

The rest of his greeting slipped visibly from his mouth. "I'm sorry?"

"Yes, that too." Crossing her arms, Jane's scowl deepened. "You have a lot of apologizing and
explaining to do."

"Alright." A handful of people passing by cast curious glances to the pair. "What about?"

"Thirty-three days."

Finishing his approach, Erik raised his eyebrows expectantly. "I'm going to need more to go on than
that, Jane."

"I've been back for thirty-three days, and you're still tiptoeing around me like I'm made of glass."
Jane unwound her arms just long enough to poke him in the chest. "I survived the frost giants' prison
and killed one of their wolves. A little bit of news isn't going to make me fly off the deep end."
"I'm… still not following. What are you talking about, Jane?"

"I'm talking about how long you were going to keep me in the dark." Despite her best efforts, the genuine look of confusion he wore cut through her ire, had her frown easing somewhat. "When were you going to tell me about the readings you've been getting?"

"Readings? What readings?" An almost imperceptible note of recognition flickered through his features, but it wasn't quick enough to escape notice. Even if she hadn't caught it, Erik was shifting in a painstakingly obvious way. "There hasn't been any activity or——"

Jane held up a hand. "Please, Erik, don't insult me."

"It was… I didn't… you were just…" For a second, it seemed like he was going to give denial another go, insist on his ignorance, but then he sighed roughly and ran a hand down his face, muttering to no one in particular at first. "Damn that Darcy." And then to Jane. "She wasn't supposed to tell you about that."

"And you trusted her not to?"

Erik shrugged half-heartedly. "Eh…"

"For once, I'm not going to complain. I'm beginning to appreciate your unfailing tendency to have faith in people more and more." Taking her in without knowing a thing about her, working with Tony Stark to retrieve her from Jötunheim, and confiding in Darcy whose ability to remain tight-lipped was questionable at the best of times, to name a few. "Especially when it benefits me."

"Yeah, well, hindsight's twenty-twenty."

"That's what they say, along with it's water under the bridge now."

Spurred on by her small victory, Jane dropped what was left of her tense demeanor and flashed a confident grin. Now that she had him cornered, the details of his current research were as good as hers. Erik seemed to realize that as well, what with the way he issued another exaggerated sigh, threw up his hands, and spun on his heel.

"Come on…" After a short jog to catch up, Jane kept pace beside him. "It can't be that bad, Erik. Think of all the progress we'll make working together. Deep space anomalies are my specialty." She nodded to a security guard holding the door open for them. "Nate sends his regards, by the way."

"Who said the readings were from deep space?"

"No one told me, I just…" Assumed. She'd just assumed. She'd assumed that whatever readings he'd been registering were along the same lines of those she'd documented in Puente Antiguo and the years before, but apparently… she turned to Erik who pointedly avoided her gaze as they stopped before one of the many elevators. "They're not?"

He stabbed the upward call button with more force than necessary. "No."

"What are they, then? Where are they coming from? What's giving them off?" A ding signaled the elevator's arrival, but when the doors opened, Jane yanked his arm to keep him in place, forcing him to meet her eyes. "What have you been researching?"

People surged past them onto the empty elevator, no one paying any attention to the awkward impasse happening on the threshold. Even if they had, Jane wouldn't have cared. She could sense Erik's weakening resolve, could see it written on his face, and she was proved right when he cast a
pained look to the ceiling the minute the doors slid closed.

"I'm going to regret this." He jabbed the call button again, this time the down arrow. "I just know I'm going to regret this."

"I don't see why. Since when have I ever hindered your research?"

"This isn't about hindering my research. There are certain things you were never meant to see."

When the elevator arrived, they were the only two to enter. "The Director is not going to be happy about this."

Jane waited until they were alone before rounding on him. "Whatever you're dealing with, I still don't get why you'd want to keep it from me."

"This isn't deep space anomalies or other realms, Jane. This is…" His head fell against the back wall with a dull thud. "I don't know what it is, technically, but it's dangerous."

"You said that about Thor, too."

"And I was right, wasn't I?" Pushing away from the wall, Erik grabbed her shoulders with an earnest expression. "He might not have been dangerous to you directly, but he was dangerous by extension and look where it landed you. If I hadn't gotten in contact with Director Fury, you'd still be—"

"It has to do with how you brought me back, doesn't it?" Jane narrowed her eyes. "Doesn't it, Erik?"

But she already knew the answer. She just wanted to hear him say it, needed that confirmation. "Tell me!"

"Yes! Yes, it has everything to do with how we rescued you!" The elevator began to slow its descent. "And now they're probably going to take me off the project because I wasn't supposed to tell you and all my time spent here will have been for nothing and I'll have to start over all because you had to know about…"

Too late, the pair realized they'd come to a stop and the doors had opened, displaying their exchange to a man observing with barely-contained amusement. Arching a brow, the man looked back and forth between them.

"Problems?"

Jane eyed the new addition. At first glance, he seemed nondescript – brown hair, muscular build, average height – and could've passed for any normal gym-going guy. But a closer inspection suggested something different, a little off. Maybe it was the tactical suit in a building of business suits or the keen edge beneath the teasing grin.

Or it could have been the bow slung over his back.

Reluctantly stepping forward, Erik motioned her to follow. "No, Agent Barton, everything's fine. Ms. Foster is with me."

However, before she could fully exit the elevator, the agent inserted himself smoothly between them, blocking her path.

"I see you're still sneaking into things you shouldn't."

Jane jerked to a stop to avoid running into him and frowned. "Excuse me?"

"I recognize you from New Mexico. I was the detail on the hammer when that guy tried to take it. Donald, wasn't it?" The blatant sarcasm only served to deepen her frown. "I saw you hiding over
that hill. Ironic, isn’t it, that he’s released not twenty minutes after you make a phone call?"

"Listen, I don’t—"

"And now we’re supposed to trust you with—"

"So now I’m untrustworthy because—"

Unfazed by her annoyance, the agent shifted to speak over his shoulder. "You know the protocol, Dr. Selvig. Fury didn’t approve this."

"Then call it in and let him come down here himself." Erik nudged the agent aside so she could slip into the hallway. "He knows Jane. He'll want her on the team."

Without waiting for a response, they left Agent Barton behind and began to make their way towards the lone door at the end of the corridor. Only once did Jane look back and saw the agent whispering into a comm on his wrist, attention trained on them as he fingered the string on his bow thoughtfully.

"Director Fury was the one with the eyepatch, right?" She vaguely remembered him coming to visit after her release from the S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors.

They stopped before the steel door, and Erik placed his palm on a nearby scanner. "Yes."

"You really think he’ll want me to help with the research?"

"God, I hope not. The last thing I want is for you to be mixed up in this mess, but I said what was needed to get you in here." The seal around the door separated with a rush of air. "You can thank me later." Then, with an easy push, the door swung open and Jane stepped through the doorway.

The room was bathed in a blue light that was both reminiscent of Jötunheim and completely different at the same time. It transformed corners into shadows, highlighted the smooth planes of equipment. Hesitantly stepping forward, Jane could almost feel it seep into her eyes and wondered if they’d been dyed cerulean when she cast a backward glance to Erik who silently nodded her on as he shut the door.

The source of the light originated across the room. From her current distance, it was indistinguishable, just a blurry glow. However, the closer she got, the more it compressed until it was revealed to be a block-like object encased in one of the many machines. It glowed from within, but aside from that, there was nothing overtly ethereal about the item.

Except…

Stopping just short of the block, Jane stared hard, transfixed, barely daring to breathe. There were voices, whispered voices in a language she didn't understand. It was like hearing someone speak underwater or through the haze of half-sleep. The inflection was there but not the words. It was enough to stir something in her, though, some innate lure that had her reaching out before she could consider otherwise.

"Don't touch it."

Jane halted with only a couple inches to spare. Footsteps approached from behind and a hand settled on her shoulder, but she couldn't look away from the object's churning depths. It was hypnotic, in more ways than one. She could feel traces of it extending through the infinitesimal space to her fingertips, snaking over her skin like a current.
"What is it?"

Erik activated a machine to her right that whirred to life. "S.H.I.E.L.D. recovered it during World War II and has been studying it since. They call it the cube."

"Sounds like a low-budget horror film." A spot on her upper thigh tingled uncomfortably, and it was with considerable effort that she withdrew her hand to rub at it. "So this is what you've been studying."

"It's also how we opened the bridge, although there's some fine-tuning to be done to stabilize it. We were barely able to pull you through before it collapsed."

Jane knew that. She could visualize the split-second in which she was yanked from Jötunheim through the bridge and the resulting discharge caused by her displacement that had shoved Loki into the Void in startling clarity. No stable bridge should have reacted that way. That much she'd learned from her experience with the Bi-Frost.

"Stark designed the equipment based off your notes. All I had to do was configure the parameters and direct the cube's energy." Erik laid a hand on the machine holding the cube. "Its supply is virtually limitless, Jane. I've never seen anything like it."

An energy source.

*If gravity can bend space, it means the principle is sound. We just need to figure out a way to generate and manipulate a sufficient amount of gravity, enough that we could bend space-time and fold it over on itself.*

Jane took an involuntary step back.

*Even if what you're saying is possible, the amount of power needed to fold space and open one of your bridges would be astronomical.*

She closed her eyes and pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead.

*I know. We'd need the source to be extreme... like harnessing the energy of a supernova or something equally as impossible to capture.*

But it wasn't impossible. Not anymore. Centuries worth of research limited by technological advancements and a decade worth of research limited by her own lost memories and it all boiled down to this – a simple cube with limitless supplies of energy. It was the culmination of everything she'd ever studied, the last piece of a puzzle she'd spent a lifetime constructing. And it was all at her fingertips.

"Jane?" Starting, she opened her eyes to see Erik watching her carefully. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I was just..." She cleared her throat, swallowing the memories and rearranging her thoughts. "Darcy said you'd been getting readings. What kind?"

Another machine came to life with Erik's help, along with a screen showing a trend analysis of the past three months. "Mostly blips centered in our own atmosphere, but occasionally there are small spikes of localized gamma radiation."

"Here in the lab?"

Erik nodded. "There's nothing to worry about, though. They're too weak to be any real danger. Still,
it's strange." Cocking her head to one side to hear him better as he moved about the room, Jane
absentmindedly traced the zigzagging line marking the activity. "Barton likes to call the cube a
doorway. Obviously, it's not – it's only a means of creating a doorway – but if it was… I don't know,
it's almost like the blips could be considered knocks and the spikes someone jiggling the handle to
see if it's unlocked."

A group of laughing teenagers trailed her down the corridor, but Jane was oblivious to them,
dumping her bag on the floor just inside the apartment and kicking the front door shut without ever
looking away from the book in her hands. Her scarf and jacket joined the bag moments later. Then,
ignoring the small sitting room only a few steps away, she leaned against the door and slid down to
sit on the floor.

Every turned page resulted in a wave of nostalgia. The brittle texture of aged parchment, the scent of
its leather cover, the threadbare binding, the fading title… Jane curled around the newly purchased
copy of the Prose Edda, tucking her legs beneath her and pressing the heel of one hand to the ache it
stirred in her chest.

How long had it been since she'd last bothered reading any of its stories?

How long since she'd even owned a copy?

The last one she remembered having was back in 1938. In an uncharacteristic moment of
forgetfulness, she'd left it sitting on the lawn at the peak of San Francisco's Buena Vista Park when
Loki had appeared one afternoon to distract her. By the time he'd taken her back to retrieve it, it had
been gone.

Whoever the thief was, he or she would've been surprised by the book, or more specifically, by the
notes scribbled throughout the pages. After all, it wasn't very often someone decided to edit generally
accepted tales of mythology. But that's exactly what she'd done. She'd used the copy as her own
personal journal, rewriting the stories of old to match those she'd wrestled from Loki.

Jane's thumb brushed across one of the paragraphs. Also numbered among the Æsir is he whom
some call the mischief-monger, the first father of falsehoods, and blemish of all gods and men: he is
named Loki. The pages in her hand were unmarked, but she huffed a laugh, remembering the
comment she'd once added: not only of gods and men.

However, after catching sight of the next statement, her smile dwindled. Son of Fárbauti the giant,
his mother was Laufey. That had been crossed through in her copy. She'd jotted a correction - son of
Odin All-Father, king of Asgard; Loki Odinson – beside the phrase in her neat, nineteenth-century
handwriting.

She'd made the note believing the book's author had been mistaken about Loki's parentage.

Funny how it was her revision that turned out to be the lie.

At the time, there had been too much happening for her to dwell on the significance of Loki opening
a path through the ice barrier erected on the brink of Jötunheim. It wasn't until her debriefing with
Agent Coulson that she'd remembered Gerðr's offhand remark in the dungeons of Útgarðar, how
only a jötun was capable of removing ice created by a fellow jötun.
Jane considered the last name. As far as she knew, there was no way around it. The blood of a frost giant coursed through Loki's veins. It was the only explanation for him being able to melt away the ice. Even if he were the child of an affair, sired by Odin and born of a frost giant, he would still be an Odinson, could've been taken to Asgard after his birth.

And yet Skaði had clearly called him Laufeyson.

Nothing added up. The authors of the Prose and Poetic Edda stated Laufey to be Loki's mother while Skaði's declaration would've made Laufey Loki's father. No, it didn't add up at all. However, as much as she might balk at the idea, Jane was inclined to believe what she'd heard firsthand in Jötunheim over a centuries-dead author. Especially when said author was wrong on so many other accounts.

She'd once written completely false next to the stories of Loki giving birth to a foal, having children with the frost giant Angrboða, and cutting off the Lady Sif's hair. Various versions of Thor is Loki's only brother had been beside every mention of Baldr. Some of the stories she'd changed altogether to follow what actually happened according to Loki.

Plenty of things that didn't fit.

Plenty of reasons to doubt the author.

Still… that wasn't to say the book was entirely incorrect.

Jane thumbed back through the pages. Thor is the foremost of the Æsir, the strongest of all the gods and men. He possesses three things of great price, the first being the great hammer Mjölnir, which all beings know when it is raised on high. True enough overall.

And after that: Loki is beautiful and comely to look upon, evil in spirit, very fickle in habit. He surpassed other men in that wisdom which is called 'sleight', and had artifices for all occasions. He would ever bring the Æsir into hardships, and get them out with crafty counsel. A bit of a stretch with the evil in spirit part, but again, mostly true.

There was the story of the builder who'd demanded Freyja, the sun, and the moon as payment and the lineage of great kings that came before Odin All-Father, the account of Iðunn being the Keeper of the Apples and the tale of Odin challenging the frost giant Hrungnir to a horse race. True stories, all of them.

So, in the end, it seemed the Prose Edda was filled equally with fact and fiction.

Thor had helped fight a kingdom to rescue Freyja, but he was not married to the Lady Sif. The Lady Sif was Heimdall's sister, but her dark hair hadn't been forged by the dwarf Sindri. Odin wielded a staff forged by Sindri, but he was not Loki's true father. Loki was able to use what the Æsir believed to be magic, but he'd never had his lips sewn shut.

However, he had been taken prisoner by Skaði.

And been bound beneath a great serpent.

And suffered the venom as it dripped onto him.

Jane skipped ahead until she spotted a familiar section. What felt like a lifetime ago, she'd bracketed off the tale of Loki's punishment at the hands of Skaði and added the prevalent completely false. She recalled the way Loki had laughed after reading the author's prediction of his role in Ragnarök for the first time. Not that she could blame him. She hadn't believed any of the stories then either.
But now… now everything had been flipped on end. Things she'd believed certain had become lies and lies, truths. Loki wasn't an Asgardian but a frost giant while a story they'd both written off as preposterous had been brought to life. And that didn't even begin to touch on the more… personal matters.

Sigyn had been the one foretold to catch the venom. Instead, it was a thousand year old Viking-cum-astrophysicist named Signe that had completed the task. And Jane could plead accuracy and argue the finer points of basin versus skull and Sigyn versus Signe and wife versus lover and protect versus freed until she was blue in the face, but in the end, Loki had been right. Coincidence could only explain so much.

But if coincidence wasn't to blame, that only left…

Fighting the urge to rub her cheeks at the memory of icy hands cradling her face, Jane blew out a sigh and snapped the book shut. Loki had said it was fate, that it had always been and always would be fate. Between the uncanny stories and the history between Loki and herself, it made for a valid argument.

But she refused to believe in fate.

She couldn't.

Right?

Jane let her head fall back against the door as she stared unseeingly at the ceiling. How was she supposed to know what was real from what wasn't? How was she supposed to know where coincidence left off and fate began? She laid a hand flat against the cover of the Prose Edda. Where was the truth within the fairytales?

"See, this is what I'm talking about."

Jane jerked at the sudden noise, head flying up from where it had been resting on her forearms and elbow accidentally knocking a sheaf of papers off the desk. The pages fluttered to the ground around Erik's feet. Slowly, she looked from them to his crossed arms to the displeasure scrawled across his face.

"I don't…" The words came out raspy with sleep. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "What's going on?"

"There was a reason I wanted to keep you out of the research, because I knew it would come to… to…" Erik shuffled the loose pages into something vaguely resembling a stack before gesturing helplessly to her. "To this."

"Don't you think you're overreacting?" With as much calm as she could muster, Jane sat up, smoothed the hair from around her face, and wiped away a line of drool from the desk before it was noticed. "There's nothing wrong."

"Oh, really? Is that why you haven't slept in an actual bed in two weeks?"

"One week."
"Twelve days."

"And a futon is basically a bed."

"That's a couch."

"It's a futon."

"Only if you unfold it, which you don't, so it's a couch." Erik stalked to the far wall to flip on the overhead lights. "God, Jane, I thought I'd seen the last of this obsessing in New Mexico, but you're worse now than ever. I'm just glad the Director agreed."

Something about the sentence struck a chord, and Jane rotated slowly, suspiciously, in her chair. "Agreed about what?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D. has decided to relocate the cube to a base in the Mojave Desert." Still holding the papers, Erik attempted to straighten the mess she'd created over the past few months. "There are other ongoing projects at the site, so resources will be limited. Only a select group of people are going."

"Don't tell me—"

"You're staying here."

"No!" Jane leapt to her feet, sending the chair spinning behind her. "No, I refuse to stay behind!"

As if to contribute to the argument, one of the machines in the corner beeped and recorded an atmospheric disturbance. They both looked at it out of habit, Erik's attention lingering longer than hers. "You don't have a choice. Director Fury was the one to—"

"And who told him it would be better for me to stay, hm?" There was a furrow between his brows when their eyes met again. "You can't do this, Erik. This is my life's work. Without me, there wouldn't even be a project."

"But there is a project, Jane! Listen…" Taking a deep breath, he rubbed the back of his neck. "You know I care about you. I love you like you were my own daughter. But you don't know how to study something without getting in over your head, and it worries me. That's why you have to stay."

"If you really know me, you know I won't stop. Not really. The cube doesn't have to be here for me to test algorithms and run diagnostics and analyze the data I've collected, so leaving me here is pointless."

The silence that filled the lab was suffocating. Erik gauged her, tried to hold out until she caved, took in all five-foot-four of her stubborn, bristling, unyielding self with his own form of determination, but eventually he was forced to settle for shaking his head in some combination of disappointment and disbelief.

"What is it about all this that gets you so worked up?" It came out low, the question phrased more to himself than her. "I'd say it was my fault, but you've been this way since I met you."

"Erik…"

"You're brilliant, Jane. Really, you are. You're finally receiving the recognition I always knew you deserved. But things have been different since New Mexico. You've changed." He leaned one shoulder against a filing cabinet. "What happened in Jötunheim?"
If she wasn’t so upset, Jane would’ve laughed. What happened in Jötunheim? The better question would be what hadn’t happened in Jötunheim? In the end, what happened in Jötunheim had changed everything. She was still Jane but she was no longer the Jane that Erik knew, and reconciling the two to each other was something she hadn’t quite figured out yet.

How was she supposed to balance the need for a return to normalcy with the need to exist in a reality fabricated from children’s stories? How was she supposed to function knowing she didn’t belong on either Earth or Asgard? How was she supposed to be satisfied with her current relationships when they didn’t include one dark-haired, pale-skinned, exceptionally intelligent, annoyingly mysterious, magic-wielding God of Mischief?

Perhaps she couldn’t.

But she’d never know the answer until all the pieces were joined together again.

Her anger tempered, faded into a soft appeal. "Please don’t take me off this, Erik. I’m asking you, not as a colleague, but as a friend.” Ducking her head, she ran a hand over the notebooks splayed across the desk. "This is something I have to do."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Erik shake his head and look – really look, not just glance – at what he held for the first time. Then he went impossibly still. And by the time Jane remembered what was scrawled across the pages, he was already flipping through the notes and it was too late to correct her error.

"What’s this?" It was like seeing an oncoming train but being helpless to prevent the collision. She knew what was coming and mentally berated herself for being so careless as to let Erik get ahold of that particular stack of papers. "Are you… Jane, please don’t tell me you’re adjusting the parameters."

"Okay, then, I won’t."

"The original model was correlated specifically to you. Reconfiguring the specs could be disastrous.” Erik leveled her with a severe look. "Without the proper components, you could bring back just a piece of a person, or the wrong one altogether."

Scowling, Jane snatched back her notes. "Why do you think I’ve been working on this for so long?"

"Is this about Thor?” Erik straightened beside the filing cabinet. "Is he the reason you're redesigning everything?"

When he took a step forward, she held the papers protectively against her chest. "No."

"Well, you're not working on this for lack of anything better to do."

Whirling around, Jane laid the notes on the desk, put her hands flat on the surface, and tried to remember how to breathe. The truth was on the tip of her tongue. It burned at her, felt like charcoal in her mouth and lungs, begged to be unveiled. It would be so easy to lay it all out there. Getting all the secrets off her chest would be a relief, like ripping off a Band-Aid, equal parts painful and pleasant.

But she couldn’t tell.

Not yet.

And the sudden urge to get away struck her so fiercely that she gathered her materials and keys and crossed the room in a matter of seconds. If Erik meant what he’d said, if she was to be removed from
Project Pegasus, it would be the end of her exposure to the cube. No more readings, no more tests. Not the definitive end of her research but a significant setback nonetheless.

"Jane." She hesitated in the doorway but refused to turn around, her only acknowledgement a slight tilt of her head. "Who are you trying to find?"

"No one you know."

The infinite sky stretched up and up and up. Clouds that had been wispy brushstrokes across the expanse earlier in the day had been burned off by the afternoon sun, leaving the sky clear aside from the twinkling stars. Sprawled out on the hood of the car in the wilderness outside the city with no buildings in sight, it was easy for Jane to pretend she was floating in the endlessness of it.

_I don't remember who he was or even what he looked like, but I remember certain things. Sitting on a beach and stargazing and music… jazz music. Cedar in winter. Sunrises, too, and the texture of his hair when I ran my fingers through it. I remember what it felt like to be in love._

What it felt like to be in love.

In love.

Jane squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply. She'd said she loved him. Not quite so bluntly as that, but still. One thousand years of appearances and arguments and affairs and it wasn't until she didn't know who either of them were, as individuals or to each other, that she'd been able to be truly honest, could admit to something she'd probably known for a long time but had been too afraid to say.

But was it really the truth? Did she love him? With all that had ensued between them – the things she'd said; the things he'd done – could she ever love him?

The breath Jane had been unconsciously holding whooshed out in a heavy exhale. Some people she wanted in her life, some people she didn't. Then there were some people that were a part of her life whether she wanted them there or not. That was Loki. He'd established himself so firmly in her life over the course of time that he was as much a part of her as she was herself.

She knew how he moved, all deadly purpose and easy grace. She knew the way his lips would curl into a smirk when he got his way and his nose would wrinkle in distaste when he didn't. She knew that moonlight suited him, turning his eyes molten silver and accentuating the contrast between dark hair and pale skin, but she also knew that nothing was quite so brilliant as sunlight caught in one of his rare smiles.

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She could be deaf and still hear the slightly deeper exhales he'd emit in his sleep when she'd shift against him, numb and still feel his fingers trace her jaw, dance down her spine, grasp at her hips. She could pick out his voice in a stadium, a world, an entire universe of people. She could recognize his silhouette in a room of shadows.

Although, that wasn't to say he was blameless.

Bits and pieces of a background he'd kept carefully hidden were coming painfully to light, but plenty of secrets remained. In the beginning, he'd manipulated her, played with her life like it was a game.
He’d killed people, too. Lots of people. And he’d tried to kill even more in the attempted genocide of his own race.

Jane stood by what she’d said in Jötunheim. Whoever Loki had become, it wasn’t the monster he believed himself to be. However, the lack of being a monster didn’t necessarily make a good person. There was no doubt he had his faults. But then, maybe that was what love really was: the want to be with someone in spite of their shortcomings. Or because of them.

So what next?

It wouldn’t be easy, whatever they did. The people who had existed in 2001 were gone, lost, destroyed in the fallout on the coast of Stora Karlsö. Their essence remained the same at the core, but their relationship had been distorted, tainted. They were like a shirt that didn’t quite fit anymore. The fabric felt familiar, but it was too snug in some places, too loose in others.

There was nothing else for them, though. Regardless of what either of them might want, they were bound together. Even without the suggested connections in the Prose Edda, there was too much between them – too much history, too much everything – to simply throw away. So yes, it would be difficult and a struggle and just plain hard. Yes, Loki would probably resist her, fight against it. But once upon a time, her father had called her willful for a reason.

She was stubborn.

She was resolute.

She was quite possibly in love, and god, if that wasn’t scary as hell to admit. But while her heart thudded and her stomach twisted and her mind raced at the thought, there was also an unmistakable spark in her bones. It was that inherent craving she knew so well, that need for action, for answers, and…

"I won’t give up, even if I have to build my own equipment." Jane opened her eyes and stared down the dark sky. "I will find you."

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – the majority of this chapter was molded off the ending of the first Thor movie. Before the credits, Heimdall told Thor that Jane was searching for him. That thought carries through here, only it’s not Thor who Jane is trying to find. Also, you might have noticed Jane’s peculiar reaction when she encountered the Tesseract. Consider the question of what Loki stole from the fire giants and hid with Jane. If you hadn’t yet figured out what that item was, this is a big hint.

Hr’awkryn also brought up a good point: isn’t it possible Skaði could have read the stories and set up Loki’s torture to mimic them? Yes, she absolutely could have. After all, she did hint at having read the tale Jane knows. However, she also made the comment that she’d been using the serpents since the dawn of the ages. Tales tend to vary between cultures, and I imagine the same thing to be happening here. Remember when Loki said Asgard’s description of Ragnarök was different? I’d like to think every realm has a different take on the events. Therefore, Skaði might be familiar with Midgard’s version, but basically, she’s been doing her own thing this whole time and it’s just coincidence. Or fate… because, you know, that’s the point of the story.
Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
A lot of you have been wondering about the fire giants. They haven’t had much of a presence in this second arc, but that doesn’t mean they’ve been forgotten. They’re very much a player in the overall scheme of things. While Jane and Loki have been dealing with their own mess and working their way through the movie-verse, the fire giants have been plotting in the background. Don’t worry, they’ll make a reappearance in the third arc in a big way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“You’ve got your ball, you’ve got your chain – tied to me tight, tie me up again. Who’s got their claws in you, my friend?”

2012: New York City, United States

Part One

“Hey Erik, this is Jane. I know it's early, but I just picked up a strange reading. A really strange reading. My equipment isn't nearly as sensitive as yours, and the spike was still strong enough to blow the transformer to the building. Figured I couldn't be the only one to catch that. Anyway, I know you can't give any specifics about the cube, I was just hoping you could tell me whether you saw something similar on your end. Give me a call when you get a chance.”

“Me again. I was going back through a time lapse of the incident when I noticed a second reading. It wasn't nearly as strong as the first and happened only a few minutes after, which explains how it kind of slipped under the radar. Weird thing is that it looked to be more centralized than atmospheric. Almost like a gravitational anomaly, or something along those lines. I don't know… it could just be my machines. Our power's back on now, so you can call the lab or my cell.”
"Hey, I was just curious how your machines are doing. Ever since yesterday's incident, mine have been going haywire. They're recording small-scale blips every few minutes. I'd be concerned, but I'm pretty sure you'd call if you were experiencing the same thing. It makes me think there's a bug in my equipment design or the power surge fried something. Call me."

"So, I'm at a loss. I've run every diagnostic I can think of, and everything has come back normal. If there are any flaws or damage, I can't find them. I guess I'll keep checking. It's hard to think all this activity is normal. But anyway, you need to take some time to return my calls. I know you're busy, but you're starting to turn into me."

"Erik, it's Jane. I hope everything's okay... I haven't heard from you in a while. That desert didn't swallow you up, did it? My equipment's still on the fritz. I could really use some advice, so it would be great if you quit working so hard and call me back."

"If this is supposed to be a joke, it isn't funny. We've never gone this long without at least checking in with each other. It's not like you to drag this out."

"Please call me, Erik. I'm starting to worry."

"This must be what it's like to be out of the loop."

"Hmm?"

"I feel like something important is going on, but everyone forgot to tell us."

Jane's eyes flicked up to scan the corridor, then back down to the list of calculations she'd been scrutinizing. "Ignorance is bliss, Sharon."

"It's not ignorance when you know something's off. That cuts out bliss and just leaves aggravation." Snippets of various conversations bounced off the tile walls around them but did nothing to disguise the subsequent sigh. "I feel so unimportant."
"You're important to me."

"Thanks."

Jane rolled her eyes at the blatant sarcasm but cracked a smile nevertheless. Normally reserved, professional, and to-the-point, there were few things that managed to get under Sharon Carter's skin. In the couple months she'd been assigned guard duty, for lack of a better word, Jane had only seen her truly agitated twice. The first was when she lost a bet on a baseball game to a fellow agent. This was the second.

Sharon craned her neck to follow the progress of a lab-coated employee who darted past them. "You can't say you're not curious."

"Hold these for a second." Only half-listening, Jane rifled through a stack of pages and handed over a list of probability ratios, two graphs, and a handful of printouts on the recent incidents. "And yes, I can."

"Oh, please… don't even pretend like you're not curious about everything." Sharon accepted the paperwork with a snort that Jane pointedly ignored. "Twenty bucks says you'd hijack a personal jet, fly to D.C., and bust into Fury's office yourself if this was about the cube."

"As if I could get past the security clearance for the upper floors, much less Fury's office."

"But of course you'd have no trouble hijacking and flying a jet."

When the pen wedged behind her ear began to slip, she repositioned it, arching a brow at Sharon in the process. "You think I can't?"

The question earned a predictable laugh from the agent. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s file on one Jane Foster was more in-depth than most, but nowhere did it list any abilities that would be useful in commandeering or flying an aircraft. As her detail, Sharon would've been privy to that information. However, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s file was imperfect, limited by the unknown that constituted everything pre-2001. For all they knew, Jane Foster was nothing more than a leading expert in astrophysics and the only person with experience in inter-realm travel.

There was no way for them to know she'd been raised a Viking or that she'd survived piracy's Golden Age, the War of 1812, and World War II. There was no way for them to know of the blood on her hands that resulted from a kill or be killed mentality she'd been forced to adopt in the early thirteenth century. There was no way for them to know she was fully capable of riding horses, steering ships, and flying planes.

Jane hid a small smile behind her hair at the joke that wasn't a joke. The memories still hurt sometimes, almost like the lingering ache of a phantom limb, but they didn't hurt as bad as in the beginning. In the end, time had a way of healing all wounds. Preoccupation didn't hurt either.

"What if this is about the cube?"

Pulled from her internal reflections, Jane was slow to realize Sharon had stopped walking. It took a moment of scanning the crowd to find her several feet back, standing in an intersection of hallways. With her dark jeans, boots, and black leather jacket, the agent looked lost in the sea of business suits and lab coats.

"You told me what happened the other day. I hadn't really considered it, but…" Sharon shoved her hands in her pockets. "What if all this is because of that?"
"It's not about the cube. I'd know if it was." At least, she hoped she'd know. Normally, she'd find a way of coercing Erik into confirming her readings with his own, but seeing how he'd apparently fallen off the face of the earth, that was out of the question. Still... "This is nothing, Sharon. You're just psyching yourself up. This is..." She gestured around them. "It's..."

The majority of the S.H.I.E.L.D. employees in the corridors were going about their normal business. They laughed and joked and meandered by the two women, utterly at ease. Jane couldn't deny that some were acting different, though, walking just a little too fast, heads bent together, mouths tight with what could only be stress.

Sharon frowned, the instincts that made her one of the top up-and-coming agents in the New York office clearly in play. "It's something, alright."

"It's nothing."

But then she thought of the hurrying and the whispering and the readings, and suddenly those words didn't quite carry the strong conviction they had earlier. A seed of doubt had taken hold, rooted, spread without her even realizing it.

Three men and a woman too deep in conversation to pay attention to where they were going forced Jane and Sharon to separate. As they passed, Sharon withdrew her phone and used her height to casually inspect the holographic tablet they held. Jane, on the other hand, didn't need to see.

"... Pegasus was compromised when a..."

"... classified, but that protocol isn't permitted in a..."

"... the data files recovered suggested NQ2..."

"... Stuttgart and the Helicarrier, it's only a matter of time..."

The group vanished around a corner, leaving Jane immobilized by the bits and pieces of what she'd overheard while Sharon stepped forward to fill the empty space left in their wake. All action, she held out her phone to display a series of pictures taken of the tablet interface. They progressed through a slideshow, one after another, continually repeating as Jane stared on with wide eyes.

One was of a wall that had been reduced to twisted metal and shattered glass. The next was blurred by motion but appeared to be some kind of rod glowing blue at one end. Another was of an unknown man sprawled across a stone like a sacrifice, a bloody mess where one of his eyes had once resided. The last picture was partially obscured by a shoulder, but the upper half showed a mess of flames consuming a base. A S.H.I.E.L.D. base in the middle of the desert.

Sharon's expression was grim when Jane took the device with trembling fingers. "You still think nothing's going on?"

The alcove didn't provide much protection from the hallway, not even with Sharon blocking the entrance as much as possible. Noise still found its way around her slender frame. Rotating towards the back wall, Jane tried to compact herself into a corner, pressed the phone to her ear so firmly it hurt, waited for the quiet hum of static to give way to ringing...
"We're sorry, you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check the number and try again."

Something that might have been her heart but was probably just bile clogged the back of her throat. She lowered the phone and stared inanely at the screen with its blinking disconnected message. Then it went blank. And it was ironic how her mind did much the same.

"It doesn't mean something's happened to him. Don't look at me like that, Jane. S.H.I.E.L.D. manages Dr. Selvig's phone, right? So if something happened with Project Pegasus, they probably just turned it off for security reasons."

"Yeah, maybe." The tension in Jane's shoulders eased somewhat as she shuffled into the buffet line behind Sharon. It made sense. Erik was involved in a highly classified project, and any leaked information regarding the cube could be disastrous if it fell into the wrong hands. Still, the nervous energy that had wormed its way into her muscles wasn't ready to let go. "But what if—"

"Main dish?"

The cafeteria worker was staring at her impatiently when she turned. "Oh, um… the fish, please. What if—"

"Which fish, ma'am?"

"That one." She waved a hand in the general direction of a row of breaded filets. "What if he was in the base when that fire broke out?"

Individual servings of green beans and macaroni and cheese found their way onto Jane's tray, courtesy of Sharon. "If Erik was hurt, don't you think someone would've told you?"

"I'd hope so, but I can't help but be wary of top-secret organizations after the whole stint in Puente Antiguo, even if I do work for said organization now." Jane leaned a hip against the railing. "S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn't exactly playing nice when they took my stuff."

"Coulson gave it back."

"Yeah, to keep Thor happy." A bowl of peach slices was added next to the green beans. "There's nothing to stop them from keeping things from me now."

"Listen, Jane…" Sharon paused, handed over a glass of water, and crossed her arms. "There's no reason for S.H.I.E.L.D. to keep something like that a secret. If Erik was hurt or dead or whatever, you'd know."

Sliding up to the cashier, Jane held out her ID to the scanner. "Unless it had something to do with the cube. That's why they took me off the project to begin with, because I was wearing myself out."

"You're still wearing yourself out."

"True." It was pointless to deny her work ethic when they both knew just how many long hours she spent in the lab. "But until I hear from Erik himself, leave me to wallow in my doubts and suspicions."
"Jane, I can respect what you're saying, but Aunt Peggy used to say it was the basic need of a society to have something they could trust, believe in. That was meant to be S.H.I.E.L.D." They crossed the lunch room, heading for their usual spot in the northwest corner. "If we can't believe in it, what else is there?"

"I don't fully believe in any institution that demands my trust."

She'd seen the fallout of those regimes more than once. They were the ones that demanded loyalty and compliance in exchange for protection, or sometimes just for the chance to live. They were also the ones that rose and fell. People were not made to be conquered, and those that attempted it were often consumed from within, burned by a rebellion from the very people they'd pinned under their thumb.

So no, Jane didn't trust S.H.I.E.L.D. She could appreciate its capabilities and the belief on which it was founded, fawn over its resources and equipment, but that didn't mean she trusted it. Too much power was a dangerous thing.

"What do you believe in, then?" Sharon was frowning at her as they weaved through the tables. "God? Fate?"

"Does it have to be anything?" Their conversation had taken a hard right into familiar territory, and déjà vu hit Jane like a train. It wasn't the first time she'd had this discussion, even if it was the first time she'd had it with Sharon. "Maybe there's only life and what you make of it."

"You sound like an idealist."

"No…" Jane shook her head. "I'm more a realist."

Granted, the way she'd phrased it did err on the side of idealistic. Control was a widely-prized commodity, and the suggestion that people could control their future was enticing. And hopeful. And empowering. However, reality's underbelly was far grittier because there was only so much a person could do. If immortality had taught her anything, it was that there was no way to prepare for the curve balls of life, no way to predict things to come. There was a fine line between fate and chance, but the outcome remained the same. Neither played fair. Life was ultimately nothing more than a sequence of events that melded together into something beautiful or tragic or, sometimes, both.

"But anyway…" Having reached their table, Jane unloaded her tray and slid into the seat. "How can you get on me for not trusting S.H.I.E.L.D. when you don't either?"

Sharon's head shot up in surprise. "Where do you come off saying that?"

"I'm pretty sure you're the one who started this conversation."

Astonishment melted into incredulity as the agent scoffed. "I started this?"

"I'm so out of the loop." Jane waved her fork dramatically. "Nobody tells me anything."

"That's not what I said. Not to mention, I don't sound anything like that." As an experienced agent, Sharon could intimidate with the best of them, but the hard edge of her scowl eased under Jane's snicker. "Oh, shut it."

It was the closest thing she'd probably get to a smile, and deciding it was better not to press her luck, Jane absently looked out the window. Sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling window while clouds drifted across what little sky she could see between the skyscrapers. All in all, a beautiful day. And thanks to Sharon – or rather, her teasing of Sharon – her mood had lifted to match it.
"Well, if your goal was to drag me into an existential debate to distract me from the issue with Erik, congratulations, it worked. Jane speared a forkful of green beans. "I won't be hijacking jets anytime soon."

"I thought you didn't trust S.H.I.E.L.D."

"I don't." The filet was shredded into flakes as she alternated between picking at it and staring out the window. "But while I may not put as much faith in S.H.I.E.L.D. as you, I have to believe in the decency of humanity."

All dry sarcasm, Sharon rolled her eyes. "How very Gandhian of you."

"I try." Jane shrugged, nonchalant. "Although, I have to question your decency at times. Since when does macaroni and cheese go with baked fish?"

Mirroring her pose, the agent lifted one shoulder. "Since you were too busy arguing the merits of my employer's trustworthiness to order your food. Should've paid more attention instead of holding up the... what the hell?"

The table in the farthest corner of the lunch room had been Jane's place of choice to eat ever since she'd transferred to the New York office. Isolated, for the most part, it was easy to ignore the other happenings and conversations. That was why it took Sharon segueing into a different topic altogether for her to pick up the change in the room's atmosphere.

Almost as one, conversations that had been easygoing faltered, became clipped, and slipped into worried murmurs. The very air thickened until it felt like molasses coating her windpipe and pooling in the bottom of her lungs. But she wasn't overly worried about breathing, not when all eyes were trained on the various televisions scattered around in the lunch room.

Immediately on edge, Jane twisted in her chair to look at the television anchored overhead and whatever program had captured everyone's attention just as Sharon scrambled onto the table, scattering several of their dishes, to turn up the volume.

"Breaking news for those of you just tuning in: a beam of light originating from the top of Stark Tower is causing serious commotion in midtown Manhattan. Casey has just arrived on scene. Casey, can you tell us what's happening?"

The news anchor was replaced by a petite redhead. "Hi Paul, I'm here at the base of Stark Tower. As you can see, some kind of light beam is being discharged from the top of the building and into the sky. This has been going on for several minutes now. It's been made public knowledge that Mr. Stark had recently completed an upgrade that would allow the tower to be self-sustaining for a year, but we have yet to get in touch with anyone in Stark Industries, so I'm unable to confirm whether this is an expansion of that project or a new one altogether."

"Casey, is it possible this has nothing to do with Stark Industries?"

"Unfortunately, yes, that is a possibility. I've overheard police officials on site discussing everything from publicity stunts to terrorism. From what we gather, no one had any knowledge of this event ahead of time, so that's not a good sign."

"No, not a good sign at all." When yelling broke out off-screen, the reporter pressed a finger to her earpiece, prompting the anchor. "How are people in the area reacting?"

"There's a general sense of unease down here on the streets, but other than that, nothing to report. If you're travelling into or out of midtown, expect major delays. Traffic has all but come to a stop."
Until we hear something else, it's all pretty touch-and-go."

"Thank you, Casey." The feed transitioned back to the news room. "I've just received word that we now have a chopper on site. We're going to cut over to Tyler with an aerial view from the chopper cam."

A young reporter wearing headgear was shown briefly before a slightly shaky view of Stark Tower appeared. "Paul, there are several machines set up on the roof of Stark Tower, one of which is responsible for this event. You can see it there in the center." The picture zoomed in, but the brightness made it impossible to make out any details.

"Have you been able to determine the purpose of the machine?"

"No, but the beam has been centered on the same spot in the sky since the event began, and we've noticed it becoming significantly darker over the past few minutes. Wait, is that..." The camera jerked, blurred into focus. "There appears to be an unidentified man on the rooftop."

Jane leapt to her feet with a gasp. "That's Erik!"

"What?" Still perched on top of the table, Sharon glanced down over her shoulder. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

"We have yet to see any sign of Tony Stark, CEO Pepper Potts, or anyone else affiliated with Stark Industries, so we can only assume this man is involved in the situation at hand. It's unclear how he reached the rooftop, though, especially since the tower security is notoriously tight. Some are suggesting an inside—"

Without warning, the entire building shuddered. Several shrieks pierced the air when the lunch room was momentarily plunged into darkness, and Jane stumbled before grabbing the table while Sharon knelt, arms held out for balance. The television blinked back to life just as everyone began to calm down.

However, the image it displayed was anything but calm.

The camera pitched to and fro, sporadic glimpses alternating between a dark spot in the sky and the reporter's frightened face, the beam of light and the grey interior of the helicopter, white-knuckled fingers on a handle and the streets of New York far below.

"— believed to be the cause. Aircrafts are pouring out of the hole. There are... things riding them, Paul. Aliens. They're firing on the city. We're trying to retreat to—""

Another tremor rocked the building, knocking the power out once more and causing dust to rain down around the lunch room, falling like ashen snow. People began to stir. Some stood but remained stationary. Others shifted worriedly, easing towards the various exits. The differing reactions made it easy to pinpoint the agents from the more lab-oriented S.H.I.E.L.D. employees in the verging panic.

Sharon slid off the table and circled around to Jane. "I don't know how this—" She was cut off when the power came back.

A mess of pager and cell phone beeps sounded throughout the room simultaneously, along with an announcement over the building's intercom system – we are experiencing a Code Blue; all agents report to the ground floor immediately; I repeat, all agents report to the ground floor immediately – before the power failed again.
In the relative darkness, Sharon grabbed Jane's shoulders, snagging her attention away from the mad scramble that was beginning. "I have to go, but I need you to take the stairs down to the lab. You'll be safe there."

The television flipped on, and the resulting chaos on screen automatically drew Jane's eyes. There was a bright flash at some point beyond the helicopter and a disjointed shout from the cameraman, then a large chunk of metal was torn away and the yelling was exchanged for rushing wind. The last thing she saw before the video feed switched back to the anchor desk was a wildly revolving view of the city and the reporter as both he and the camera fell through the sky.

"Do you hear me, Jane?" Sharon shook her firmly. "Jane?"

"Yes, I… I understand." It came out surprisingly steady, despite what she'd just witnessed.

"Okay." The lunch room was rapidly emptying of people. Sharon released her shoulders to seize her jacket from the back of the chair. "Take the stairs over there, and be careful. Don't do anything… stupid, alright?"

Jane nodded, grasped Sharon's hand in a fleeting, silent farewell, and watched her disappear into the mêlée. Then she was alone. Taking a deep breath, she jerked towards the stairwell Sharon had suggested on shaky legs but hadn't made it more than a couple steps before remembering what she'd left behind.

The indecision couldn't have lasted more than a split-second. Safety called to her, but so did the materials lying on the table. In one direction, her odds of surviving rose; in the other, they fell. But those unassuming papers were the most promising sections of her research, the best potential she had for creating a stable Einstein-Rosen bridge, the only way she knew of to find…

Jane gritted her teeth.

Sharon was going to kill her.

Doubling back, she skidded to a stop beside the table and snatched up the pages just as the building quaked, the floor buckled, and the windows imploded.

A thousand years of instinct kicked in, and Jane fell to the floor. She covered her head as glass peppered her hair, arms, and back. One of the metal window frames crashed to the ground nearby, upending several tables and sending chairs and glass skidding in all directions, but thankfully, the nearest table protected her from the worst of the debris. It was only after the figurative dust had settled that she peeked out to see the lunch room deserted.

Wind gusted strongly through the building causing a door on the far side of the room to swing, the faint tapping against the frame echoing eerily through the empty space. Feeling the slightest bit lost in the aftershock, Jane came onto her hands and knees, looked up as the fluorescent lights blinked once, twice, three times before going permanently dark. The television clicked off too, and while the news program had long since given way to static, the sound of battle could be clearly heard in the newfound silence.

Damaged remnants of her research danced around her feet as she stood, but for the first time in as long as she could remember, they went ignored. She needed to leave. She knew she needed to leave. But she couldn't. Daylight streamed through the window into the darkness of the building, and she was caught in the contrast, a moth drawn to the flame, enraptured by the activity beyond the building and pulled by some horrid need to witness the destruction.
And it was destruction.

Stopping where the floor ended and air began, she could see everything. People fleeing, aircrafts dotting the sky, creatures swarming through the streets like a tidal wave… Jane forced down the lump in her throat. The entire city had descended into madness.

She didn't know the what or where or why of what was happening, but she could hazard a guess as to the how. Erik was obviously involved, and the beam of light originating from the machine on Stark Tower had created an Einstein-Rosen bridge above Manhattan that allowed other beings into their world.

It was the cube.

That was the only explanation.

A growing hum lured her focus from one of the aliens scaling the building opposite her. Almost faster than she could follow, a group of aircrafts tore past the building, closely pursued by a streak of red and gold. Flashes of light erupted from those leading, and Jane nervously watched who she now recognized to be Tony Stark in his Iron Man suit weave around the blasts and retaliate in kind.

"Jane Foster?"

Caught up in the skirmish, the unexpected voice made her jump and turn quickly. She watched as two – no, three – agents materialized out of the darkness, all wearing tactical uniforms and tinted glasses despite the power outage. A precursory glance revealed only one to have his pistol drawn, but she didn't miss the way another agent's hand hovered near his hip where his own firearm was likely holstered.

Instantly wary, she rotated to face them more fully. "Yes?"

"I'm special agent Hartmann, and these are Agents 18 and 22." The man in front nodded to each of his comrades. "We're here to get you to safety."

"And you need guns for that?" Jane crossed her arms at the disingenuous half-smile her question earned and tried again. "Seems to me there's a whole city that needs helping. Kind of a waste for S.H.I.E.L.D. to tie up three agents in babysitting one astrophysicist, isn't it?"

"It's only a waste if you're captured."

Captured? Jane paused. Why would she, of all people, be captured? Why would she even be a target? A shiver that had nothing to do with the battle commencing behind her back skittered down her spine. Perhaps it was because of Erik, but if so… the thought of her mentor being the reason for everything happening had her heart sinking, emotions settling on something painfully close to betrayal.

"Your safety is paramount, Miss Foster." Something crashed into the building opposite theirs, but not a single agent so much as flinched. "If you were to be taken hostage, it would be a liability to Thor."

"Hold on, what do you mean liability?" Jane took an involuntary step forward. "Are you saying Thor is here in New York? That he's part of all this?"

For the first time since arriving, Agent Hartmann broke eye contact as he fished out a small tablet and tapped on the screen. "Is this the same man you spent time with in New Mexico?" Jane leaned forward just far enough to take the proffered device.
It was impossible.

Or it felt impossible, at any rate.

Six months. That was how long it had been since she'd last seen Thor. They'd been forced apart by the frost giant's ultimatum, and with the Bi-Frost destroyed, that was the way things should have remained. Only those with an affinity for magic were able to find the seams within Yggdrasil and travel between the realms. By his own admission, Thor did not have that gift.

And yet, there he was.

Jane touched a finger delicately to the picture. Unlike her last memory of him – pinned to the Rainbow Bridge, agonized yell shadowing her between realms – Thor appeared fine. Better than fine, actually. There was no spear. No alarm or betrayal-spurred grief. Instead, he stood in some kind of control room with an unmistakable ease, looking for all the world like he belonged there in spite of his otherworldly armor.

Lacking Heimdall's unique ability to see through the realms, she'd been left in the dark with no inkling as to Thor's fate. The wound he'd suffered in Asgard could have been a fatal one, for all she'd known. However, now she held hardcore proof of his wellbeing, and a sense of worry she hadn't fully recognized was there to start with drained away.

"Yes…" Jane swallowed thickly. "That's him."

"Then, yes, he's here." Before she could react, Agent Hartmann strode forward and plucked the tablet from her hands. "Unfortunately, that also means you are highly vulnerable, so if you don't mind…" He nodded meaningfully towards the nearest exit. "We're running short on time."

Something crashed into a building further down the street as if to emphasize that point, and Jane shrank away from the open windows obediently, suddenly feeling Agent Hartmann's urgency. Immediately, the three agents formed a protective triangle around her. The small group weaved quickly through the lunch room wreckage in silence, glass crunching underneath their feet the entire way, but it wasn't until they'd entered the stairwell and begun their descent that Jane was struck by a thought.

"You never explained why I'm at risk of being captured."

Leading the unit, Agent Hartmann lifted one shoulder like the answer was obvious. "You know Thor."

Jane snorted. "Me and a whole town full of people. It's not like I was the only one with him for those three days." Granted, they had spent the most time together and he had taken her back to Asgard and they had kissed, but still…

"Maybe not, but I assume you saw what happened to Dr. Selvig." The brief clip from the news program replayed in her mind. "If he was used in such a way for his association with Thor, imagine what would happen to you."

A quick grab for the handrail was the only thing that prevented her from pitching forward when she stumbled in surprise. She knew her doubts hadn't been unfounded. There was no way Erik would've ever been drawn into such a malicious plot. He must have been forced into it, coerced.

"The enemy is well-aware of your ties to Thor."

Jane tried and failed to catch Agent Hartmann's gaze as they rounded a corner. "How could you
possibly know that?"

"Because it was Thor who informed S.H.I.E.L.D."

The answer came from behind, and she cast a withering glance to one of the agent's bringing up the rear. "And how would he know that?"

"Because the enemy is his brother."

Where she'd stumbled before, this time Jane stopped altogether. "What?" One of the agents offered a suggestive push, but she dug her heels into the grating, stubbornly refusing to move.

The enemy was Thor's brother. If the conclusion she'd derived from the events of Jötunheim and the stories told in the *Prose Edda* was true, the God of Thunder technically had no brother. Nevertheless, that revelation wouldn't have erased two thousand years of time together, not for good-natured Thor. That only meant one thing.

The enemy was Loki.

Five steps below, Agent Hartmann realized the procession had come to an abrupt halt. Yelling had begun to echo up the stairwell from the lower levels, which probably contributed to his visibly impatient expression as he withdrew the tablet for the second time. He backtracked up to Jane, handing her the device.

"This is the man heading the invasion. His name is Loki."

Jane's heart seized up at the familiarity of the image to the point it nearly took her breath away. After Jötunheim and Stora Karlsö, after searching for so long… the sight of Loki hurt. It hurt so unlike what she'd felt at seeing Thor alive and well. But then, it would be different, wouldn't it? Her feelings for Thor ran no deeper than friendship while her feelings for Loki spanned the ages.

"He showed up in one of our bases four days ago where he killed several agents, apprehended the cube, and destroyed the Project Pegasus base. You'll recall the cube, of course." Agent Hartmann leaned over and swiped the screen, bringing up a video file that began to play. "He's been causing trouble ever since."

The sharp crack of gunfire carried up the stairwell, but it wasn't enough to drown out the recording. In it, Jane watched his typical attire fade into the battle armor she'd only seen a handful of times. She watched him use a scepter to destroy an oncoming car and magic to frighten a crowd to their knees and words to claim his intentions. She watched him kill one innocent man and attempt to kill another.

And just like that, Jane was reminded that Loki was the enemy here – that he was responsible for what had happened to Erik and what was happening to the city; that he wasn't in New York for her but for control and domination and rule – and her emotions reworked themselves into something bordering revulsion.

"It's imperative we keep you out of his hands." The video cut off as Agent Hartmann took the tablet from her now slack grasp. "S.H.I.E.L.D. has a base in Norway where you'll be safe."

There was no love lost between Loki and humans. He'd made it evident over the years that the only human he felt anything other than disdain for was her, and even then, that affection wasn't without a small degree of self-loathing. But this… what he was doing was beyond anything she could've imagined even from him.
And yet, she couldn't find it in herself to leave.

Not now.

However much disgust churned in her stomach at his actions, something far strong lay beneath it. Maybe it was fate. Maybe it was love. Maybe it was simply a bond forged over a millennium, saving each other's lives, and falling back into old patterns when they didn't even know each other. Maybe it was nothing but her own sense of responsibility. Whatever it was, she no longer cared about the label. All she knew was Loki was the problem and there was a chance she could be the solution.

Setting her jaw, Jane lifted her eyes to her reflection in Agent Hartmann's dark glasses. "I'm really sorry about this..." Then she shoved him in the chest.

Before the other agents could react, she elbowed the one directly behind her first in the groin and then, when he doubled over in a wheeze, in the nose. He staggered sideways into the wall, leaving her free to edge past, duck the remaining agent's clutches, and use every ounce of strength she possessed to shoulder her way into his shins, knocking him off his feet.

For a moment, one hand found purchase on the back of her shirt, but it disappeared just as quickly once gravity went to work, pulling the agent forward to tumble over her and headfirst into Agent Hartmann, who had only avoided a full-out roll down the stairs by a last-ditch grasp for the railing. The collision was too much for one handhold, though, and the duo slid further down the flight.

With adrenaline coursing through her veins, Jane scrabbled to her feet. She hung around just long enough to shove the second agent into the other two before leaving the jumble of men behind, sprinting back up the stairs towards the rooftop.

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – I know that the wormhole opened right away when Erik initiated the Tesseract, but indulge my lengthening of the process. It was much more fun to drag it out and have Jane see the progression via media coverage. Everyone enjoys a little drama now and then.

Also, if you picked up the vibe of a more trusting Sharon Carter, that was intentional. She’s younger here and a little more naïve since she hasn’t experienced the events of CA:TWS yet, so I imagine her to have significantly more faith in S.H.I.E.L.D. being the ultimate good guy. You have to love her, though. Snarky, ambitious, leather-jacketed Sharon gives me life.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
2012 New York City, United States - Part Two

Chapter Notes

What a summer! I have a whole list of excuses as to my absence, but I’ll save all of them in favor of saying I’m sorry for the wait. You guys are the best for hanging in there. Hope everyone enjoys this chapter! We’ve come full circle to the prologue. Don’t worry, though, we still have a long way to go before the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty

“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

2012: New York City, United States

Part Two

"Stop!"

Jane pushed harder, lungs burning with breaths that had turned from heavy to gasping and muscles aching from their continued sprint up the stairs. Rounding a corner, she took a moment to peek over the railing into the depths of the stairwell to see the agents trailing her a few flights below. One of them leaned out, and Jane saw her face reflected in the mirrored lenses before she took off once more.

"Come back!"

As if that was going to happen. Did Agent Hartmann think she'd decided to fight him and his men off and climb twelve stories for the fun of it? No, turning back wasn’t an option. She had to reach the rooftop. She had to find Loki. If she were to surrender now, they would only proceed to haul her off to Norway.

"Jane, we have to get you out of here!"

Case in point.

Skidding around the last corner, she clambered the last few steps to the rooftop access, threw open the heavy door, and emerged into blinding sunlight, fresh air, and the sound of war. The door slammed shut behind her with a thud that would’ve been loud were it not for the deadly symphony that occupied the air. Alien and military aircrafts flew overhead, filling the sky with bullets and – were those energy blasts? – that occasionally hit their mark but, more often than not, rained down on buildings and the unsuspecting populace below.
And even though the agents were growing closer, Jane froze for a moment to stare with wide eyes and a slack jaw at the destruction, the sheer devastation that had fallen over the city.

Suddenly, a muffled shout sounded from behind the door, breaking through her immobility and spurring her into action once more. She scanned the rooftop. Smooth concrete, air conditioning units, a small utility structure… nothing that she needed. But then she noticed a jagged strip of metal to the left. Her legs were shaky, unused to the flat surface after the climb, but she forced cooperation from them as she stumbled forward.

With no time to spare, she drug the weighty panel – judging by the half-scorched imprint of a flag at the far end, it was the last remnant of a fighter jet that had recently been shot down – back to the rooftop access. The yelling was growing louder, too close for her to do any more than wince and readjust her grip when the keen edge of the metal sliced open her palm.

It wasn't until the panel was wedged beneath the door handle and braced against the ground that she finally allowed herself a deep breath. Her heart continued to race, but the rest of her muscles dissolved into mush, begged for a reprieve. Wearly, she collapsed against the door and let her head fall back before sliding to the ground.

The pounding of the agents' fists vibrated through her back.

"Open the door, Jane!"

She numbly watched the battle taking place in the sky.

"You need to come with us!"

Her hand stung, felt sticky with blood.

"It's not safe!"

But really, what was safe anymore?

Safe was a straw cot and a heavy wool blanket, listening to the winter wind's fierce howling while being warmed by a fire in the hearth, staring at the comforting crosshatch overhead. It was snowballs and laughter, noses red from the cold, mouths stretched wide in grins, white powder dusting hair and collecting on eyelashes. It was big band jazz, painted lips and kohl-dark eyes, short dresses, long nights, the taste of tobacco and moonshine and rebellion in the air.

Safe was firm muscles and the hard press of fingers, the scent of cedar and frost, breathless moans and quiet whispers, mischievous smirks, the shiver of magic, fingers brushing across cheekbones and through hair, the color green in an endless world of grey.

Jane sighed. Those forms of safety were long gone. Now the things she'd once considered a haven of sorts had been cast aside, the harsh reality of the world replacing them with things that were decidedly unsafe.

Because safe was not the iron scent of blood on the air, blank and glassy eyes atop a grimace, sickness, rape, bile and excrement, prison bars, mushroom clouds, radiation, buildings crumbling into dust, anger and hate and death.

It wasn't a wormhole that allowed an alien force to bear down upon Manhattan at the behest of a god.

It wasn't an antechamber in a land of ice, blue flames highlighting an ancient evil.
It wasn't waking up in a hospital alone.

A whirring aircraft passed a little too close for comfort, effectively scattering Jane's thoughts and sending her scrambling around the structure concealing the staircase to hide in the shadows. There, she watched as the machine continued onward, closely followed by a silver and red blur. A silver and red… wait.

"Thor!" Leaping up, she sprinted to the edge of the building. "Thor!"

Jane screamed his name over and over again until her voice cracked with the strain. However, her efforts were in vain. The cacophony of battle swallowed everything, and she was forced to watch as Thor continued in the opposite direction, ultimately landing on the spire that adorned the top of the Chrysler Building.

Defeat welled up unbidden. It had been a fool's plan at best, but it was still better than running away. In the end, though, there was no other word for it. She'd failed. And now she was alone. Alone and stranded on a high-rise with no way of finding the one person that could definitively end what was happening.

Out in the open, the wind whipped madly, yanking her hair to the point the strands left stinging lashes across her face and neck. The tangled mess obscured much of the view, but nothing could block the whale-like creatures passing through the hole above Stark Tower.

Jane was still clinging to the ledge when everything exploded.

The blast of energy from the passing alien cruiser shattered the concrete beneath her, and she could no longer discern between sky and ground as the force of the explosion flung her through the air like a rag doll.

Time seemed to slow.

It would be just her luck that she'd fly over the edge of the building. Would the fall be as terrifying as she imagined? Was instantaneous death painless? Who would be the one to identify her splattered remains? What if they couldn't identify her at all? She'd be just another nameless victim lumped in with the other unidentifiable casualties of the battle, and the people closest to her would never know the circumstances of her death, would be forced to mourn a body-less casket and an empty grave. Of course, that was assuming they even defeated the aliens.

Time sped up again.

Jane landed heavily against an air conditioning unit. Broken pieces of concrete jabbed into her back and her leg was bent beneath her at an unnatural angle, but there was little she could do except try to remember how to breathe as dust and debris settled around her. It took a considerable amount of effort before the sweet rush of oxygen filled her lungs… only for it to end in a harsh gasp.

Her lungs were on fire, or was that her chest itself?

Her muscles?

Her bones?

Her heart?

Pain was a knife swimming through her veins. It was all she could focus on, the intensity of it sending black spots dancing across her sight. She needed to breathe, but right then she needed to
move more. Because it was the concrete beneath her causing so much pain, right? Surely, she'd be able to breathe easier without the jagged edges digging into her back.

Jane wiggled her fingers first as a test and, at the success, drew her hands on either side of her. There was a moment in which she gathered her thoughts, a brief second where she gladly anticipated how freely she'd be able to inhale afterwards, but when she tried to push herself up, her chest exploded in white-hot blades of agony. And it was ironic how dull the fire in her lungs felt right then compared to the inferno in her chest.

Darkness swelled and overtook her, and when it finally receded, she had no way of knowing if she'd passed out for ten seconds or ten minutes. The world was a haze. The sky blurred, a dull ringing filled her ears, and she couldn't really feel the concrete beneath her fingertips anymore. Blinking slowly, she desperately tried to restore some semblance of calm even as her heart raced in panic.

Gradually, the sky sharpened and her senses returned, but when she took in a slow, hesitant breath, there was no ignoring the wet gurgle that accompanied it.

A punctured lung.

As if everything wasn't complicated enough, she'd managed to puncture a lung.

The culprit was likely a broken rib – that would explain the ungodly pain in her chest – and if her crackling inhales were any indication, there was fluid in the lung as well. Naturally, that would be her luck. She couldn't recall swallowing since the explosion, but it was possible traces of saliva had leaked down her throat. Then again, it was just as possible she was bleeding internally.

Jane's mind readily settled on something to analyze, clinically noting that if air was leaking out of her injured lung, the other would eventually collapse from a lack of room to expand. Not that it mattered much anyway. A person her size could only live for thirty minutes at the most when suffering from a punctured lung with liquid in it, and with the current state of the city, there would be no one coming to her rescue any time soon. By the time help arrived, she would be long dead, having either drowned in her own fluids or asphyxiated from a lack of oxygen.

Preferable to death as a red smear on the ground after more than a thousand foot fall, but still…

The detached analysis was calming, and in the aftermath, Jane felt strangely resigned. There was no honor in facing death with fear. She'd been raised on that belief. So it was at least some bit of comfort that, although the end she faced wasn't necessarily one to be proud of, it wouldn't be a complete disgrace. Death could come on far worse wings.

Warmth on her face drew Jane's focus to the sun's brilliance first, then the sky.

It was beautiful, vast and endless and boundlessly stretching out as far as the eye could see in wispy strokes of white on unadulterated blue. She traced the cloud's patterns, followed their graceful dance through the heavens. And if she ignored the battle and the sharp, definitive lines that were the modern world, she could almost imagine she was home.

Smell the briny sea and the sharp bite of coming winter…

Feel the earth and the soft edges of grass beneath her…

Hear the gentle ebb and flow of the tides over the cliff's edge…

But home dissolved into steel and rock in the span of a blink, and with nothing left except the sound of war in her ears, smoke in her nose, and ashes on her tongue, the wrongness of it all fueled the last
shreds of determination. Because she refused to die in a crumpled heap atop a pile of stone.

Gritting her teeth against the shooting pain, Jane crawled to her feet. There was a second where she swayed, clutching tightly to the coiled top of the air conditioning unit as darkness crept in from the edges of her sight, but then it ebbed and she was able to stand upright, or as upright as broken ribs and a punctured lung allowed.

The sky darkened without warning before being split apart by streaks of lightning and crashing thunder. Jane could feel the energy in the air. The static danced along her skin like a tangible thing, made the hair on her arms and the back of her neck stand on end. And when the electricity dissolved, the lightning faded, and the skies cleared, she was surprisingly unsurprised to see him standing where he hadn't been before.

Alabaster skin, dark hair, grey-green eyes, adorned in familiar shades of green and gold and black that he'd worn since the beginning… it was like looking at a memory, peeling the image directly from the past and pasting it in the here and now. She drank in his form, and it wasn't the first time she thought how easy it would be to drown in the sea of details that comprised him.

"Loki."

"Jane…" Something that vaguely resembled concern flitted across his face before it shifted into that cool indifference he'd always worn so well. "What are you doing here?"

She could have answered, allowed him to take the lead as he so often had in the past. Or she could have given voice to any one of the thousand things she'd thought or felt since the last time they'd seen each other. But still able to hear battle and – hidden deeper in the background – the silence of death, all she could do was revise his inquiry.

"What are you doing?"

"Ignorance has never suited you, Jane." Loki's mouth curled in an unamused smile. "Surely you can surmise my goal."

So they were going to play that game. The combined disregard and blasé attitude had Jane frowning. Surreal as it felt, though, she could go with it, pretend that the last time they saw each other hadn't been nearly six months ago as he fell into the yawning cosmos.

The staff in his hand caught her attention. That, and the smoking remains of a building that had just crumbled under the weight of a fallen Leviathan. "Total destruction?"

"A world made free." Loki held up a hand to correct her. "I would rule Midgard as a benevolent god."

"I saw what you did in Germany." Turning, he walked a meandering path to her left, his pace sorely out of context with the situation. Jane followed his every movement, but he looked up, out, down… anywhere but her. "There's nothing benevolent about carving out someone's eye or trying to kill a defenseless man. True leaders don't need fear to control others."

"Don't they?" At that, Loki met her gaze. "The one thing mortals cherish above all is the idea of freedom, but they fail to realize that freedom is crippling. With too much sovereignty, life results in nothing more than a race for power."

"I already heard this speech."

"Yet you refuse to accept the truth of it, you who know me to be right." There was a steely glint to
his gaze that made her shiver involuntarily. "How could I not rule with an iron fist? Resistance is natural when independence is so highly prized. So when the mortals refuse to yield, what choice do I have but to meet force with force?"

Jane shuffled closer, biting back a hiss of pain at the pain that accompanied the movement. "This isn't some you brought it upon yourself kind of thing. You can rationalize it all you want, but the bottom line is that you're killing people, Loki. Innocent people."

"No one is innocent."

"It doesn't matter. They should be able to live their lives how they want, whether it's a struggle or not. You…” One hand flattened against her broken ribs while the other pointed accusingly. "Have no right to take that away from them, from me."

Mirroring her actions, Loki took one step forward, then another. "I beg to differ."

Part of her wanted to look down, but giving in wasn't an option, not in the game they were playing. Because it was a game. A dangerous game of intimidation. And while Loki had always excelled at intimidation, the effect it had on her had somewhat lessened over time while her stubborn willfulness had only grown.

Jane arched a brow. "Oh?"

"Yes." Another step closer. "I have every right." Only a few feet separated them now, and she was forced to lift her chin to maintain eye contact. "This is my due, Jane." How could she ever have forgotten how tall he was? "I was born to be a king."

"And I was born to die in the middle of a battlefield, but sometimes things don't work out like we expect!" The reminder had less of an impact than she'd hoped, and his stony expression made her want to tear out her hair in frustration. "The time you spent in the Void obviously didn't change you at all. You're just as conceited and arrogant as you always were, always thinking you're so superior."

"Then we have both remained unchanged since the ages have done little to dull your tongue. It's as sharp as ever, I see."

"This…” Jane gestured to the wreckage and the aerial battles still taking place. "All of this is bullshit. I know you well enough to know something else is going on, and for the God of Lies, you've never been very good at lying to me. So tell me, Loki, why are you here?"

A cruel smirk tugged at his mouth. "To rule this—"

"Why are you really here?"

Loki's smirk fell. Maybe it was the interruption or the way her eyes flashed with righteous anger or the determination evident in her clenched jaw… whatever the reason, it had him staring at her hard with an intensity that burned like fire. He shifted almost imperceptibly, and for one long second, Jane thought he was getting ready to either kiss her or kill her.

But then he was stalking away. He gripped the remains of the concrete ledge that lined the rooftop to the point the mortar crumbled beneath his hands. He spun back around to face her, the ends of his surcoat slicing through the air before curling around his legs.

"Is this not my legacy, Jane?” Wearing a deceptively calm façade, Loki extended his hands wide. "Is this not what I have been foretold to do?"
And it was oddly funny how a few simple words threw the entire situation into startling clarity.

"That's why you're doing this?" A telling silence was the only response Jane received. "You, of all people, should know the future is never set in stone."

"I, of all people..." Where her voice had risen with awful awareness, Loki's lowered dangerously. "You maintain your belief that the realms are subject to chance. After all we've been through, you hold on to hope that you alone control your life. Why? You are no fool, Jane. You have seen the signs as well as I."

The space between them began to lessen. He crossed the rooftop, approaching her with such purpose that it took every ounce of resolve Jane possessed not to backtrack. Only when virtually no space remained between them did he stop.

"There is no faith to be had, no free will to be executed outside of that which has been written."

Loki's hand darted out. It caught her chin in a vice-like grip, forced her to meet his eyes, but when he continued, she was surprised to hear his tone had lost its iron edge. "You think it was by chance that we met?"

She wanted to say yes.

Deep down, however, she wasn't quite sure how to answer that.

Not anymore.

Without his fire to stoke it, Jane's exasperation burned itself out, and she was left gazing up at Loki earnestly. "I think the future is vague. It's indistinct. You may think your life is ordained, but you're wrong." The hand not pressing to her ribs reached up to lightly touch his forearm. "The future doesn't bind you anymore than time bound me."

"That is where you're wrong." His eyes flicked back and forth between hers. "I am nothing more than a rat in a maze, confined to the walls that surround me and the road ahead. It no longer matters which path I choose to walk. They all lead to the same end."

"Loki..."

"The Norns have spoken." The fingers on her chin softened but didn't fall away. His focus did, though. It lowered until Jane was staring at dark lashes, and the eerie glow of the scepter only seemed to enhance the blue veins crisscrossing his eyelids. "This is my fate."

"It's only a book." She grasped the fabric of his sleeve. "It was just a bunch of stories."

"Stories that became strangely accurate. No..."

When Loki stepped back, the loss of his presence left Jane swaying forward into the vacant space. He took a deep, steadying breath. In that split-second between his inhale and exhale, she could literally see the workings of him as he composed himself, pulled the frayed pieces of his being back into place and stitched them together with a kind of resigned persistence. And when his eyes finally met hers, the look in them made her shiver for the second time.

"Do you not see, Jane? I am a tool forged in the fires of fate. I am the destructor, the godkiller, the slayer of worlds."

She couldn't breathe. The air snagged in her lungs.
"I am death."

And somewhere in the depths of a molten world, Jane could almost feel the devil smile. Not the red-skinned, fork-tailed devil so many religions feared, but something much more terrible than that. A being that no doubt stood as the inspiration for mankind's watered-down beliefs, a being whose minions had been committed to finding Loki for the better part of a millennium, a being with a thirst for revenge.

Surtur.

Because if the stories told in the fiery realm were anything like those of Jötunheim or Midgard, the incomparable ruler of Muspelheim knew his supposed role in the eventual end of days. And if Loki had Ragnarök on the brain, one could be positive Surtur, from whom a certain God of Mischief had stolen something of great value, would as well.

An invading aircraft passed low overhead, forcibly bringing Jane back from the world of mythology. There might be things brewing in the rest of Yggdrasil, but that was neither here nor there. Right now there were far more important things to worry about. The stray line of gunfire sweeping across the far side of the rooftop, for instance, or the way her vision blurred alarmingly when she shrunk away from the shrapnel.

Panting, Jane struggled regaining her balance. Loki was tracking her movements from a few feet away, but his attention dipped shrewdly to where she still clutched at her side. Breathing normally was becoming a fight in itself. She disguised the pain as best she could, though, fisting her hands by her side as she straightened.

"What happened to you?" When Loki's eyes slid back to hers, brow furrowed in a silent question, she expounded. "What happened after Jötunheim, after you… fell into the Void?"

_Fell_ was sorely lacking. It made her think of the slow-motion collapse of a tree, tripping on a stair or the raised crack in a sidewalk, the curtain dropping at the end of a play. In relation to what happened on the brink of Gröf Miðli, it was a gross oversimplification. _Thrown_ would have been better. _Forced_, even.

Loki must have gathered that too because he offered a half-smile full of sour amusement. "If you knew, you would only regret asking."

"Try me." If moving weren't so painful, Jane would've crossed her arms.

"No."

"Why not? There was a time you'd tell me… well, maybe not everything, but most things." A simpler time, perhaps, but the past was still there. No matter how extreme their current circumstances, it didn't completely erase the relationship they'd formed or the people they'd been. "What makes this any different?"

Loki's head tilted a fraction of an inch. "You really have regained your memories."

It wasn't at all what she'd been expecting, which only made the response all the more typical. Expectations had never lined up neatly with the God of Mischief. Thor, yes – his entire existence had that natural progression towards all things good and right; he was the epitome of heroism – but not Loki. He was made of too many secrets for that, framed by too many clock-gear notches where the light couldn't touch. There were moments of good, but never of heroism.

No, she'd learned early on never to expect anything in particular from Loki. Hope for things, maybe,
but not expect. And oddly, it was that understanding that explained the sudden clenching of her stomach. It was like looking into the past, a strange telescoping through time. Loki's ability to take her by surprise was as archetypal as her own propensity for willfulness, and a return to the norm left her with the dull ache of familiarity.

So even though time was of the essence for the remainder of New York, Jane took a moment for herself amidst the ruin. "Yes."

"All of them?"

"Every last one." She hesitated for a moment, teeth worrying her lower lip. "And then some."

Jane's voice had lowered to match Loki's, but there was an indescribable weight to the words that rang louder than any battle. Strasbourg and Santa Catalina and Moscow and Tromsø… the echoes spoke of centuries upon centuries of shared history. But they didn't stop there because layered over those were Asgard, Söngr Fjoll, Gröf Miðli. A thousand and one infinitesimal moments that combined into something infinitely larger, something fundamentally important.

Neither of them so much as blinked when another bout of lightning took down a stream of invaders coming through the wormhole, although Jane did flinch when one of the falling aircrafts collided with a nearby building. She used the movement to steer the conversation, though, stepping forward with purpose.

"What happened, Loki?"

Loki studied her. It was a searching sort of look, the kind that was a little too hard, too penetrating. His eyes roamed her face like she was a particularly difficult problem he could solve if he only tried hard enough, but if he found the solution, it didn't show because that intensity never faded, just stretched on and on with their stalemate.

It felt like the early days again, those long years before they'd ironed out the awkward wrinkles of their relationship. Too much resentment and too little trust. The scrutiny made Jane restless, but just as she was about to shift uncomfortably, the dynamic changed. Outlined by the war-torn cityscape he'd instigated, the steely edge to Loki's gaze wavered even as a new degree of tension slithered its way into his shoulders.

"I stepped from one nightmare into another." A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Then I awoke to find the nightmares were my reality."

Jane's brows knitted. "What do you mean?"

"Skaði is not the only being with an appetite for torture."

A sense of foreboding draped over her like a blanket, and even though the sun shone brightly in the wake of Thor's attack, a chill skittered up her spine. The events of Munnr Død were the stuff of nightmares. To think Loki had suffered the same so soon after escaping, that someone else out there shared the same sadistic inclinations…

Inhaling a trembling breath, Jane wet her lips. "Loki, where did you come out of the Void?"

"Nowhere in the known expanse of Yggdrasil." His mouth twisted into a cynical caricature of the mischievous smile she knew so well. "I emerged into the empty space between its branches, an uncharted oblivion filled with the remnants of the realms. However, what was always believed to be barren turned out to be anything but."
A distant explosion was the perfect accompaniment to the flat-lining of her brain, the sudden ringing in her ears. Empty space between the branches of Yggdrasil? Remnants of the realms? It didn't make sense, and the confusion must have been apparent on her face.

"Over the ages, countless exiled, long-forgotten beings found their way to the oblivion and claimed it for themselves. There, the dregs of other worlds created their own. The Realm Between Realms." Lost in thought, Loki's attention drifted for a moment. "And so those who were once cast out are now kings."

"But how is that…" Jane swayed. It felt like her center of gravity had been compromised and she'd float away any second. "That's not possible."

"Why not?" What was left of his smile disappeared into a condescending sneer. "Do not presume when even the All-Father, for all his faults, acknowledges the workings of Yggdrasil are beyond him."

"But you were the one who first told me the truth about the realms."

Loki glanced to the glowing end of the scepter, fingered the slender staff absentmindedly. "I never claimed to know all of its secrets."

"But you also said those who enter the Void rarely return."

"The Void is clearly not as… endless as I believed. Many have escaped, most without the use of magic." One shoulder lifted in a nonchalant shrug. "It's possible anyone can find an exit, or perhaps the Void itself leads to this new realm. I don't know, and I don't care."

"But how could nobody know about this?" The repeated attempts at denial sounded annoying even to herself, but Jane was a stint with amnesia, an alien invasion, and a lifetime of belief-shattering revelations past the point of caring. And anyway, with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, amiability was low on her priority list. "Isn't Heimdall supposed to see everything? Or you? You know more than the realms than probably anyone else. How could all this time have passed without anyone figuring it out?"

A lesser person would have cowed beneath Loki's glare when it snapped back to her. "You doubt me?"

"I didn't say that…" She held up a placating hand. "But it does sound a little crazy."

To be completely accurate, everything was just really, really hard to take in. Jane had assumed she'd learned all there was to know about Yggdrasil and fate and other beings over the course of time only to find out how wrong she was. It was enough to make her inner scientist scoff because, in reality, she should've known better. There were always new things to discover, even for immortal humans and supposed gods.

Still, accepting what Loki was saying felt a little like grasping at straws. Jane's focus fell to a blank swatch of concrete as she fist a hand in the hair at the crown of her head. It was similar to the first time Loki explained Yggdrasil. Even after seeing him appear and disappear on several occasions, it was hard to accept, and that was in a time when people were more inclined to believe in gods. Sometimes the hardest thing was finding the trace of reality in a completely unrealistic situation.

A stray panel from one of the alien aircrafts landed nearby, showering the roof with sparks as it skidded by. Loki followed its progress while Jane watched what remained of the original glider disappear beneath the building in a mess of fire, but they turned back to each other at the same time.
"Say all of this is true…” Her voice was getting progressively scratchier, and she coughed up some of the liquid that had built up in her wounded lung. "That would mean you've been in the Realm Between Realms this whole time."

"Yes."

"And while you were there, you came across someone who…” Jane paused. "Was like Skaði."

"You mean someone who tortured me?" Hearing it said aloud brought to mind all manner of unwelcome images, and she grimaced, unable to hold Loki's cool gaze. "I did. Though, he was no jötun but a titan."

"And then?" It was physically painful, the likelihood that what she was about to say was the truth. "You escaped to fulfill your destiny, conquer my world, and destroy anyone and anything that stood in your path?"

In her peripheral vision, Loki dipped his chin. "More or less."

Jane had never felt the desire to touch Loki so strongly as she did right then. Everything was wrong and she should be ashamed to be near him – disgusted, even, knowing what he'd done – but she couldn't help it. The heart wants what it wants, and for longer than she could remember, hers had never beat the same.

It was hard to even know when the change began. Ceylon came to mind for obvious reasons, as did the GDR. There was Italy when he'd promised to always save her, and Moscow when he actually had saved her. And then there was the time he'd unexpectedly come to her aid in a crowded Strasbourg for no other reason than to protect her. Or perhaps it went all the way back to beginning, when she'd first laid eyes on him, standing in the middle of her village like an angel of death. Maybe the feelings had been there all along.

In the end, the moment didn't matter.

She couldn't walk away if she wanted to.

Not now, not ever.

Being with Loki was like diving into the ocean. The depths are a mystery, but the surface is so beautiful that you figure there has to be at least some beauty underneath. You wade in the shallows, feel that thrill, that draw, that need for more, and know there's too much promise to ever turn back because the hot, dry beach will never feel the same again. And so you go deeper. And deeper.

But there's no room for indecision in the ocean. You either do or you don't. It's all or nothing. Hesitate and the depths will eat you alive, swallow you down like the ships and treasures of old. So you give in, and when you finally submerse, it's everything you ever expected – rough and calm, ugly and beautiful, frightening and exciting – all at the same time. It's real, and you've never felt so, so alive.

Yes, that was what it was like to be with Loki. To love him. Never easy, sometimes scary, but always worth it. And the time spent with him had been real, probably the realist thing she'd ever experienced, which had only made her fall all the more. She would've stood by him until the end of the ages.

Except now he was flying towards a fate she couldn't stand behind. People were dying at his hands as he made a bid for her world… all because of a story. His actions were a wedge, driving them onto different trajectories and weighing on the fragile remains of what they'd once had. And yet, the urge
to reach out to him remained.

It was like simultaneously moving forward and backward. She was swimming upstream in the rip
current of her own emotions, pulling one foot free of the quicksand even as the other sunk deeper.
She was both the owner and the dog being walked, straining against the tether of her own will. Even
now, she was falling – after him, for him – but with the reality of the city at war rushing towards her,
she was beginning to wonder if all she really knew of falling was finding the ground.

"What did he do to you?" Jane squeezed her eyes shut for a second before looking up to Loki.
"You've never been the patron saint of righteousness, but the Loki I knew would never—"

"The Loki you knew is no more."

"Because of that titan or whatever you called him." Disappointment reigned when she shook her
head. "He destroyed you."

"He gave me purpose." Seemingly unfazed, Loki tapped the end of the scepter against the concrete,
the resulting thud sounding far more robust than its delicate appearance suggested. "Along with the
means of accomplishing it."

Out of nowhere, the adrenaline that had been fueling her since escaping the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents
drained away. It left her weak and boneless, muscles trembling uncontrollably. The buffer that had
kept the brunt of the pain from her injuries at bay evaporated, and she stumbled backwards until she
found a lump of concrete to lean against.

"You're being used. I hope you know that." Loki's attention had followed her keenly, but his brows
lowered at the accusation. "When all this is said and done, you think you'll get to keep this power?"

"I am to destroy the realms, Jane. Not to mention the entire army at my disposal. There will be little
he can do to stop me." Turning around, he stared out onto the results of his efforts. "The very roots
of Yggdrasil tremble with the threat of Ragnarök. The end is nigh. There is no stopping it."

"And what happens when Ragnarök is finished?" When her fingers curled around the concrete, she
felt the wrecked edges of rebar reopen the wound on her palm. "Will you be satisfied when
everything you've ever known has been destroyed?"

Loki cast another of his hard-edged smiles over his shoulder. "Satisfaction isn't in my nature. I either
take what I want or burn every bridge until nothing remains."

"Kill me, then."

It would've been a lie if she said watching the smile freeze on his face wasn't the tiniest bit gratifying.
The almost imperceptible deer-in-the-headlights widening of his eyes was merely an added bonus. In
the aftermath of her challenge, she could literally see the gears screech to a halt and work to
formulate a response.

"Come on." Jane arched a brow expectantly. "I'm going to die anyway, right?"

There was a careful blankness to his expression as he slowly faced her. "You believe I won't?"

"Honestly, I don't know what to believe anymore." She did – rather, she hoped she did – however,
she was banking on the chance that the Loki she knew hadn't been completely erased just yet. "But if
you intend to kill me and everyone else in my realm, the least you can do is look me in the face when
you do it."
"This is a dangerous game you play, Jane."

"I'm not playing any game. I would just rather die at the hands of the person responsible instead of some crony. Anyway, it should be easy. I've seen what that thing can do." Jane glanced pointedly at the scepter, then tapped a finger to her chest. "All you have to do is aim it right here, and—"

Despite the distance between them, Loki shifted one foot back. "No."

"What's the problem? You've killed plenty of people." Using what little strength she had left, Jane straightened away from the concrete and advanced. "Why should I be any different?"

"You know why. Now cease this."

"But you were willing to stand by and let someone else kill me." Loki held his ground in the face of her approach, but she could see chinks in the wall he'd built around himself. If she could hook one of those, pry away the façade… "Not so easy when it's someone you know, is it? There's a difference between actively pursuing death and passively allowing it."

"I said stop, Jane." A muscle in his jaw was ticking again, as it always did when he was fighting for control.

"You…" It came out raspy, and she coughed to clear away the liquid, ignoring the warm wetness smeared across her palm afterward in favor of shoving Loki in the chest. "You're such a hypocrite!"

He caught both of her wrists before she could make a move to hit him again, letting the scepter clatter to the ground beside them. "I will not kill you!"

"I'm already dying, so what does it matter?"

Everything clicked into place in the span of one horrible second. Loki's entire countenance changed, all of the barely-restrained anger dissipating as his eyes flicked from her face to her blood-covered hand to her torso and back again with a sort of awful realization.

The fingers around her wrists loosened but didn't fall away. "You're dying." It was a question that wasn't a question.

Jane nodded. "Yes."

A furrow appeared between Loki's brows when he swiped a thumb through the blood on her palm. There were two shades – dark from the previous cut, bright and vivid from her lungs – mixing together like some gruesome piece of art, and his pale skin only made it that much more intense. He stared at the smudge for a moment. Then, without warning, he released one of her wrists and flattened a hand against her ribs.

"Loki—" She yanked futilely on his arm even as a familiar tingling began to filter through her body.

"Don't."

"But—"

"For once in your life, Jane, be quiet!"

Worry. Of all the emotions laced through his tone, that was most prominent, and it was that more than anything that stopped her struggling. "It seems kind of pointless, saving me just so I can die at the hands of someone else."
"I never planned for..." Loki paused, avoided her gaze, ground out through clenched teeth. "I will not watch you die."

And there it was. The sentiment was exactly what she'd been after, proof that he still cared, that the things he'd been through hadn't affected him in an irreversible way. His magic might have brought her back from death, but the admission eased a knot in her stomach she hadn't even realized was because of him. However, that didn't make everything else go away. He might not want her to die, but that didn't change what he believed.

"You're going to have to choose, Loki. You know that, right?" Jane absently watched a scrape on the back of her forearm fade. "There's no room in the future for both your fate and me."

Healing done, the sensation of magic ended, leaving her feeling strangely hollow. Loki didn't retreat, though, just slid the hand on her ribs to her waist and the one around her wrist to her elbow. In response, she rested hers lightly on his chest, the leather of his surcoat warm beneath her fingertips.

"I know you think there's no way around fate, but you don't have to do this. You're meant for more than destruction. Besides..." The corner of her mouth curled with a hopeful half-smile. "When have you ever let someone else dictate your life?"

The first time she stood before a mirror after waking in the hospital, she'd taken in the reflection with no idea who it was staring back at her. She was Jane Foster, of course, but what more than that? Even after progressing past the point of resenting an event she didn't remember, she'd felt adrift. Bare. As if she were only half a person trying to run on one leg or breathe with a single lung.

Some integral part of herself had been missing for too long, and having that piece returned made her ache in a way magic couldn't heal. She yearned so strongly that, before the options could be weighed, her fingers were tightening in his lapels, pulling him down even as she leaned in...

And there were few things throughout the infinite span of the ages as perfect as Loki's lips felt on hers in that moment.

It was a kiss given to Lazarus. Firm yet soft, pressing yet tentative... everything she'd forgotten she needed. For eleven years, Jane had existed someplace between living and dying, but now there was a light in the darkness. The stone had been rolled away. She'd heard the call and come out from the tomb.

Loki traced the slope of her jaw as he deepened the kiss, and she sighed in response, running her hands up to twine around his neck. War continued to rage around them, but they might as well have been impervious for as much as Jane cared. She needed this like oxygen. Loki did too, judging by the greedy way he claimed her mouth.

Drawing her impossibly close, his fingers slid into the wild mess that was her hair. There was a brief moment of concern, the passing thought of what if she were seen, the impact it would have... he needed her more, though. Loki may have escaped his demons, but there was still something in him waiting for rescue. He reminded her of a dying plant stretching towards the sun, afraid to hope but unable not to.

It was with a ragged exhale that they finally separated, and closing her eyes, Jane touched her forehead to his, whispered into the space between them.

"I searched for you. Ever since Jötunheim, I've been trying to find you." Unspoken words hung heavy in the air between them – *I remember what it felt like to be in love* – but her toe was nudging the butt of the scepter still lying on the ground, a constant reminder. When she looked up, Loki was
already watching her. "Please don't do this."

They pulled away by degrees, faces then bodies then hands. Strands of her hair were the last thing to fall, sliding through his fingers like water. Never had silence felt so crushing. There was nothing more she could say, though, and they both knew it. Whatever happened next was up to Loki.

He gazed at her for one timeless second, expression indecipherable as his focus roamed her features. Then he spun on his heel, retrieved the scepter, and stalked to the edge of roof. The act wasn't anything out of the norm, yet it seemed very final. Something about it felt an awful lot like goodbye.

"Loki…"

But the plea never received an answer. For one timeless moment, she was frozen mid-step taking in his dark profile while he stood on the brink of the building taking in the radiant sun.

Then he jumped.

And Jane watched him disappear.

Chapter End Notes

Not a whole lot of facts for this chapter, but I feel like I owe everyone some explanation as to the Realm Between Realms.

At the end of the first Thor movie, Loki fell into the Void and emerged in a place where he then met Thanos. After seeing Guardians of the Galaxy, we all know that Thanos resides in whatever realm that takes place. Since Thanos needed the Tesseract to get to Earth, I liked to believe that he and the rest of the Guardians of the Galaxy movie took place in some distant realm. However, that created an issue with the Thor movie because, if these events were occurring in one of the known realms of Yggdrasil, Heimdall would most likely be able to tell.

Cue mythology entrance.

In the Prose Edda, it’s said that the Yggdrasil, the great world-tree that holds the Nine Realms in its branches and roots, will begin to tremble once Loki is released from his prison in Jötunheim. That got me thinking… if the tree is holding the realms, what’s in all the empty space between the branches and roots? Nothing? Just the Void? Or could it be an actual realm of its own where all the beings that have fallen or been exiled to the Void rebuilt a world for themselves?

So there you go – the Realm Between Realms is my take on the tie-in with Guardians of the Galaxy and how it fits into the rest of the movies. I’ll probably be proven horribly wrong one day, but it’s what I’m going with for now.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
A couple music recommendations… the first would be “The Vote” from The Village soundtrack. I’ve suggested this one before but felt the need to do so again. It really is Jane and Loki’s theme, so to speak, for this second arc. Second is Nick Cave’s version of “Avalanche” that he recorded for Black Sails. Listening to that during the last couple sections of the chapter should put you in the same sort of mood I was while writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-One

“He’s got battlefields in his bones, and his smiles are made of thunder. She’s got battlefields in her mind, strategy maps unfolding on her skin the way other girls have stars and seas.”

2012: New York City, United States

Part Three

Hospitals were always cold. Not the entire building, of course – trauma rooms were typically warmer, along with general waiting rooms – but for the most part, medical areas were uncomfortably cold to everyone not wearing layers of scrubs and gowns or buried beneath piles of blankets. Granted, it was no Jötunheim. That didn't make it any less unbearable, though.

Jane, however, was perfectly warm.

She should've been cold. Standing near a thermostat reading a frigid sixty-five degrees in one of the hallways on the fourteenth floor of New York's S.H.I.E.L.D. base, half of which had been repurposed into a makeshift hospital wing, she should've been positively freezing. But she wasn't. Not even close. Lingering traces of adrenaline in her bloodstream were partially to blame, but the vast majority was due to the strong arms encircling her and the broad chest she was nestled against.

"I can count on one hand the number of times I've felt so relieved." Thor rubbed one hand up and down her spine. "When I learned of your presence in the city, I feared the worst. To find you safe and uninjured is…"

A miracle.

A product of magic.

A small glimmer of hope for something she'd feared lost.
Mind whirling, Jane buried her face against the hard plates of Thor's armor and squeezed her eyes shut. In the darkness of her own mind, she witnessed Loki leap from the building over and over again like a tape stuck in a perpetual loop. It was one of three pivotal points in their history where Loki had chosen himself over her. It was the moment that glimmer of hope she'd been holding onto was snuffed out.

"Not a day has gone by that you haven't been on my mind, Jane. I sought tirelessly for a way to retrieve you from Jötunheim, even though the All-Father forbade interference. Heimdall informed me of your eventual escape to Midgard, but you must know…" Thor pulled back far enough to meet her eyes, thumb and forefinger catching her chin. "I would've torn apart the World's Tree itself to rescue you if I could."

It was enough to make a girl go weak at the knees. After all, it wasn't often that someone as impressively built and with such striking features as Thor declared his affection. Anyone else would have been giddy and swooning. And yet, Jane's knees remained decidedly not-weak, attitude un-giddy, mind swoon-less.

"It's alright, Thor." Dredging up a half-hearted smile, she pulled his hand away from her face. "Really."

Thor wound his fingers through hers. "So quick to forgive the wrongs you've suffered."

"You did all you could. I can't fault you for that. Anyway, everything turned out okay in the end, right? I'm fine." A pair of nurses craned their heads to watch the scene as they passed, and Jane blushed, uncomfortable at the attention. "Safe and sound."

"Centuries of pleading would be too few to earn your pardon." Oblivious to their audience, Thor brought her knuckles to his lips. "Truly, your forgiveness is too much."

The nurses turned away when Jane's eyes darted to theirs, but their quickened pace and the way their heads dipped together left little doubt as to the topic of their discussion. If she didn't do something soon, the entire building would be gossiping about the God of Thunder and his petite, human astrophysicist. Not that they weren't already. Rumors were inevitable what with the way Thor had yelled her name and rushed to her after spotting her in the hall.

"Enough about me… I spent most of the battle hiding. You were actually fighting." It wasn't technically a lie, even if everything that came beforehand was conveniently skimmed over. "How are you?"

"Do not worry for me, Jane. I've endured far worse." With a charming smile, Thor pulled lightly at her waist, drawing her closer. "It would take more than a Chitauri invasion to best me."

"How humble of you."

Jane felt more than heard his laugh – rumbling beneath the hand against to his chest, vibrating through to the hollow spaces of her bones, curling around the small piece of her that couldn't help but be captivated by him – and smiled, this time more sincerely, in return. Happiness as easygoing as Thor's tended to be contagious.

But there was a heaviness waiting in the wings, marring the otherwise pleasant reunion. It was the elephant in the room, and they were both treading carefully like the conversation would implode if they brought it up. Who knew, maybe it would. She had to ask, though. Thor might have survived
the battle with only minor injuries, but not all injuries were physical.

"And Loki?"

As expected, Thor's countenance instantly darkened. "What of him?"

"I just… I know he was behind the attack. He might not be your brother by blood, but he might as well be for as much history as you two share." Jane laid a hand on his arm. "That can't be easy."

"He told you of his heritage?"

Realization of what she'd let slip came seconds too late. Only a select few probably knew the younger prince of Asgard wasn't Asgardian at all. No one would've guessed she, of all people, had discovered the truth for herself. Loki, maybe, knowing she could connect what she knew from the past with what happened in Jötunheim, but certainly not Thor. To him, the only explanation was that she'd been informed, which went against Loki in every possible way. Thankfully, however, her silence seemed to be taken as confirmation instead of the momentary panic that it was.

"I would not have expected him to reveal so much, especially to…" He trailed off, eyes cutting briefly to the side and mouth twisting in an apologetic way. "Perhaps the reasoning lies in the way he knows you."

It was like watching a train wreck, that helpless feeling of inevitability. Jane knew exactly where the conversation was heading, and she cursed herself for being the one to breach the subject to start with. What started as a simple act of concern was quickly turning into a convoluted can of worms.

"How *does* he know you, Jane?"

It was a good thing they were in a hospital because she was about to be sick. Everything had become impossibly complicated. How was she supposed to handle the situation she'd created for herself? Where did she even begin?

"Surely he must have said something during your time together. Or…" Thor brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "Loki said you didn't remember your past. Perhaps your experiences revealed something?"

*Mess* didn't even come close to describing what was happening. *Disaster* felt much more accurate. There was a reason she never told anyone the truth of her life, but at least in the past she'd always been prepared with an explanation of some sort when someone began asking questions. Now, though… now it wasn't an unwitting third-party she was trying to fool. It was Thor. Someone who knew them both. Someone who was directly involved.

"I don't…"

But did she have to lie? Coming clean would feel so good, so freeing, like ridding herself of a yoke that had been around her shoulders for almost a thousand years.

"I mean, he seems kind of familiar…"

But then, discretion was all she'd ever known. It was the key. That was how she'd survived for so long without becoming the subject of countless tests and experiments. If that was the goal, admitting involvement would only raise several unwelcome questions.

"It's hard to say for sure…"
But staying silent would be a gross betrayal to Loki. He might not have chosen her on the rooftop, but he had plenty of times before. Shouldn't she honor those instances? What they'd once shared? She couldn't say *nothing*, but…

"Forgive me, Jane." Thor gathered her into another hug, effectively cutting off her internal debate. "It was wrong of me to press. You're clearly innocent of whatever delusions Loki is under."

Still floundering in her indecision – *but, but, but* – Jane absentmindedly patted his back. "It's alright." However, he continued as if he hadn't heard.

"The person he has become is not the brother I once knew, and it's left me at odds. I can no longer turn a blind eye. Ambition has always been his signature trait, but the actions he's taken in the name of what he believes to be his due…" Pressing lips to her temple, he spoke into her hair. "I hardly recognize him anymore."

How ironic.

She wasn't sure she recognized herself either anymore.

A muffled commotion down the hallway drew Jane's eyes over Thor's shoulders. Something was happening, but a cluster of nurses, doctors, and would-be patients blocked the view. They milled around uncertainly for a while, talking under their breath in worried tones until the *something* progressed close enough to force them apart.

It was a small assembly of agents. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Ragged and weary S.H.I.E.L.D. agents fresh from what people had already begun calling the Battle of New York. And they were all sporting guns. Not guns holstered at their side or slung over their back, though, but rifles held in both hands, pointed down for safety but still very much armed and ready.

Tony Stark was there as well. Flashes of red and gold from his Iron Man suit peeked through the predominantly black uniforms as he walked along in the center of the group. But his wasn't the only splash of color. Just like he wasn't the only one being escorted.

Jane stiffened, breath catching in her throat. "Thor."

The edge to her tone probably garnered his attention more than anything else, and he turned just enough to look over his shoulder, following her gaze to the approaching agents, his fellow Avenger, and the startlingly familiar figure in tow.

"Yes, we apprehended him atop Stark Tower."

"And he just… surrendered?" It was such a foreign concept that the word tasted sour on her tongue.

"He had little choice." Thor turned more fully, and from the corner of her eye, Jane noticed his mouth quirk in an unamused smile. "Dr. Banner can be most persuasive."

The group paused before a steel door roughly twenty feet away while one agent broke formation to input a series of identification protocols on the nearby security touchpad. Up close, Jane could see all of Loki in horrid detail. The manacles hanging heavy around his wrists, the steel gag clasped over his mouth… there were also a myriad of wounds sustained sometime after they'd parted ways.

"What happened?"

"There has not yet been time for a full recount." People who had fallen back against the walls now edged forward again, eager to witness the war criminal that had assaulted their city. "From what I've
gathered, Loki was dispatched long enough to allow Dr. Banner the opportunity to subdue him completely."

Loki was one of the most skilled warriors she'd ever met. He possessed no shortage of cunning, agility, and strength. It would have taken someone formidable indeed to bring him down. Clearly, Dr. Banner – the name was vaguely familiar, brought to mind an accident several years back and talk of conspiracy theories – was a force to be reckoned with.

A second agent stepped forward, and Jane shifted slightly to keep Loki in view. "What about the portal?"

"Agent Romanoff closed it using the scepter."

The Chitauri invasion had ended as quickly as it had begun. One minute she'd been hiding in the narrow space between two air conditioning units, anxiously watching the aerial attacks; the next, both the beam of light and the wormhole had disappeared as the sky cleared and alien crafts fell like rain. Something had clearly happened, but she hadn't taken the time to analyze it then. She'd just been thankful it was over. If Thor was correct, though, their victory was due to one object.

The scepter.

Loki's scepter.

The very same scepter last in his possession during their exchange.

As if sensing her thoughts, Loki's gaze snapped up from where he'd been staring blankly at the floor to meet hers. It was like grabbing hold of a live wire. Energy flooded through her, consumed the surroundings in a rush of light, and for a moment, it was just the two of them. No doctors, no nurses. No armed guards or fetters or gag. No Thor. No past with its dark stain of murder, lies, and betrayal. Just him and her. Loki and Jane. Two immortal beings constantly circling one another, bound by something nameless, endlessly drawn to each other by fate or chance or, perhaps, a bit of both.

Reality, however, refused to be ignored. The world fell back into place as quickly as it had fallen apart, and suddenly distinctly aware of every point of contact, Jane's thoughts whirled out of control – *this isn't right, it's not what you think, please don't notice, don't notice, don't* – while her muscles tensed and her heart stuttered at the base of her throat. But then, Loki's eyes darted away in the exact way she dreaded, looking from her to Thor to the arms around her waist where they lingered for one torturously-long second before sliding back again.

A quick beep sounded throughout the corridor as the security door opened, and too late, Jane squirmed free of Thor's arms. The damage had already been done. Even if the gag had permitted it, speaking wasn't necessary. The way Loki's gaze narrowed dangerously, repulsively, accusingly in the split-second before the agents shoved him through the doorway spoke louder than words, and for the first time since coming across Thor in the hallway, she shivered.

Darting forward, Jane skidded to a stop at the hallway intersection, only vaguely aware of Thor trailing after. "What's going to happen to him?"

"I will return him to Asgard." Jane sensed Thor's presence at her back even before his hands settled on her upper arms. "His actions have impacted too many. They will demand justice." His sigh ruffled her hair. "I do not envy whatever punishment the All-Father will sentence."

"Will he..." Something thick and acrid lodged itself in her throat. "They're not going to kill him, are they?"
"I cannot say. Although, death might be considered a boon compared to other ends he could face."

Rolling out in a stretch of white, the corridor was punctuated only by the dark uniforms and a single flickering fluorescent light. The group had just passed beneath the light when Loki turned to look over one shoulder. Their eyes locked briefly before the security door slid closed, separating them with a thud of finality, and Jane had a name, then, for the something stuck in her throat.

Guilt.

She shouldn't feel guilty. The path Loki had chosen wasn't one she could follow. Not only had he left her again, choosing his own destructive course above all else, he'd been willing to tear apart her world in the name of a simple story. His actions had ripped them apart in an irreparable way. She didn't owe him anything. And yet, guilt sat heavy in the pit of her stomach all the same.

"But enough talk of Loki." Thor gently spun her around to face him and cupped her cheek. "I can only hope you are as glad to see me as—"

"You said Agent Romanoff used the scepter to close the portal?"

Taken aback at first by both the change in topic and her sudden intensity, Thor recovered quickly, flashing a hesitant smile. "Yes, it was the only means of doing so. That's what Erik Selvig said, at least."

News footage of Erik on the roof with the machine replayed in Jane's mind while the beginnings of a headache bloomed behind her eyes. The reporters had pegged him as an accomplice, but Agent Hartmann had suggested otherwise. How he was forced, she had no idea. Knowing he was mostly innocent didn't help things make sense, though. There were too many gaps to piece everything together.

The scepter was the only way to close the portal, but Loki had been carrying it when he left. How, then, did it end up within easy reach of Agent Romanoff on Stark Tower's rooftop? If it could be used to close the portal, why even risk taking it nearby? Loki would never be so careless. And how did Erik know it could be used to close the portal in the first place? Jane raked a hand through her hair. It all seemed too convenient.

"Jane?"

But then something clicked. A passing thought, the ghost of an idea. She was almost too scared to even consider it, because if she was wrong, it would be just one more disappointment in what had become an already overwhelming day.

"Jane?"

But if she was right… she needed clarification to know for sure, though, and there was only one person who could help her with that.

"Jane?"

"I have to go." Jane blinked, refocused on Thor's puzzled expression, and jerked backwards out of his embrace. There was a small tendril of regret at the hurt in his eyes, but she had more important things to worry about at the moment. "I'm sorry."

"What's wrong?" He took one halting step forward, hand still extended in midair after her. "Jane, wait!"
But she was already jogging down the hallway, weaving in and out of the doctors, nurses, and patients. "I'll find you later. There's something I need to do."

For almost two years, Jane had been too sensitive to so much as mention the incident that caused her amnesia. For the next eight, she'd mercilessly teased Erik about his involvement. A broken brain. That's what she used to call it. Not all the time, of course, just when trails of their research went cold but she was still in a good enough mood to joke about not being able to figure out the readings.

At the time, it had been somewhat amusing.

It wasn't anymore.

Slumped in the hospital chair for the past forty-two minutes waiting for a sign of life from beneath the blankets was miserable. She had no idea how he'd managed it all those years ago. There wasn't even any blood or bizarre, unexplainable injuries to contend with, but she still fidgeted restlessly. If she never had to wait at someone's bedside again, it would be too soon.

Around seventy-seven minutes in, the sheets stirred. Jane's bouncing knee froze, but it wasn't until he started to turn her way that she breathed a sigh of relief. "So, you're finally awake."

"At least you didn't lose all your memories." She smiled, leaning forward onto the bed so she could clasp his hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Ugh…"

"I guessed as much." The doctors said he hadn't sustained any serious injuries, but his skin was sallow and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. His wrinkles had even deepened. It looked like he'd aged ten years in only a few days. "You've looked better."

"Let's see how you look after having a god play with your brain."

The comment spurred a series of burning questions, but Jane rubbed her thumb repeatedly over the back of Erik's hand instead of voicing them. Few things could shoulder their way into priority when she was on a mission. One of her closest friends in a hospital bed was, without a doubt, one of them.

"You scared me to death." Jane stared unseeingly at their joined hands. "I couldn't get ahold of you for days after picking up that reading. Then I overheard something about Project Pegasus being comprised, and when I called, your phone was disconnected. I thought…" With a deep breath, she shook her head. "Next thing I know, you're on the news running that machine with the cube."

"Tesseract." Confused, she glanced up to find Erik staring at the far wall. "That's the cube's proper name." His gaze slid back to hers. "And it wasn't me running it. Not really. You know I'd never… that I wouldn't…"

Jane squeezed his hand. "I know."

"I thought…"
"I can still feel him in there." Brow furrowed, Erik tilted his head to one side. "Loki. Or maybe it's the Tesseract itself and all the things it showed me. It's hard to tell."

"What do you mean?"

"That scepter wasn't just a weapon. Loki used it to control me. The whole time I was with him, I was completely under his power, and now my head..." He rubbed his free hand across the crown of his head, making his hair stick up wildly. "It's like there's too much in it. Like something got left behind and there's not enough room for me anymore."

Anger welled up so quickly that Jane had to bite the inside of her cheek. She was angry at S.H.I.E.L.D. for assigning Erik to a project that put him in harm's way, and angry at herself for dragging him into the mess of her life to begin with. She was angry at the whole of Asgard for involving Midgard in things beyond their capabilities when they decided to banish Thor there.

But most of all, she was angry at Loki. For waging war on her realm. For carelessly using others to further his own agenda. For being so weak as to use a story as justification for the blood on his hands instead of owning his actions. And she'd never been one to throw around the word hate, but right then – scanning Erik's withered form, taking in his tattered expression – she hated Loki for unraveling the friend she cared for so deeply only to haphazardly stuff him back together.

It wasn't right. At the same time, though, it made sense. Between his frequent visits and the progression of their relationship, Loki had been the one to soothe her initial bitterness at immortality, but she couldn't forget Loki was also to blame for the situation to start with. He liked to play god. Always had, always would. Some things never changed.

A slight hand squeeze pulled Jane from her musings, and she blinked to find Erik staring at her. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Well, I can be pretty resilient." One shoulder lifted in an overly nonchalant way. "And I couldn't very well leave you on your own. Who else would you theorize with?"

"Plenty of scientists would kill for the chance to study the Tesseract."

"But none of them could take my place."

Erik snorted, leaned back into the pillow, and closed his eyes. "Mmhmm."

"I'm just saying that, aside from Thor and Loki, I'm the only one who's experienced inter-realm travel. It's hard to beat that kind of familiarity. But if anything happened to you, there wouldn't be anyone for me to theorize with either."

"Sure..."

"I'm serious, Erik. You're the most brilliant person I know." Person being the key word. Expand the term any more than that and it would become a bit of a race with a certain God of Mischief, but that was beside the point. "You know I need you."

"Yeah, yeah."

"And that I'd miss you."

Erik cracked an eye. "Now you're just sucking up." But his lips were curved in a slight smile and Jane couldn't prevent the quiet laugh that bubbled up in response.
"Maybe a little. I do mean it, though. I wouldn't be where I am today without you."

She meant it both literally and figuratively. If he hadn't stumbled across her, she'd likely be dead, and if he hadn't taken her in, she might have followed a different path, might never have had the chance to research the Einstein-Rosen bridges. Then she wouldn't have gone to Puente Antiguo. Or met Thor. Or reconnected with Loki. Without Erik, she might never have regained her memories at all.

It was something she probably hadn't expressed enough over their years together. Her gratitude, her appreciation, the utmost respect she held for him… and she owed him more than he could possibly ever know. The extent of what she could tell him was limited, of course, but she'd often wondered if he understood just how highly she valued their friendship or how important he was to her. She wished he knew just how hard it was going to be to leave him one day.

With a tired, lopsided smile that contained far more sentiment than could be put into words, Erik slipped his hand free to reach for the glass of water on the bedside tray. The subsequent silence was thick but not uncomfortable. He took slow, careful sips while she picked idly picked at a fraying thread in the hospital blanket.

"So now that we've established we're both fine and will make a full recovery…" The glass thunked hollowly when he set it back on the tray. "Why don't you tell me what's really on your mind?"

Jane frowned. "Come again?"

"You didn't come here just to see how I was doing." Before she could even begin to refute, Erik cut her off. "I'm not insinuating you don't care. I just know you well enough to know there's another reason you're here."

"Erik, I—"

"You forget that I've seen you at your most focused. Multiple times, in fact." He nodded towards her face. "And I recognize that look in your eyes, the one you get when something is driving you forward. I don't like it, but I know it."

Jane's mouth snapped shut with an audible click at his raised brows, the silent challenge for her to deny his claim. To do so would be a lie. She cared about Erik's welfare immensely, but he was right. More than that, he knew he was right. After seeing his condition, she'd decided to hold off on the questions, but he could be as determined as she sometimes. There would be no avoiding the conversation, not anymore, not so long as she stuck around.

Blowing out a sigh, she leaned back in the chair. "It has to do with what happened on the rooftop." Erik's mouth tightened into a thin line, like he'd been expecting that all along. "Thor said the scepter was the only thing that could close the portal."

"That's right."

"How?"

"A safety mechanism." Footsteps sounded outside the room, and he paused until they'd passed. "Once the machine had been activated, there would be no stopping it, so I built in an emergency termination procedure. A failsafe, as it were."

"That's brilliant..." Worrying her lower lip, Jane tried to piece together the sequence of events with the new information. "But it still doesn't make sense. If Loki was controlling you, how did you have the ability to install the shutdown?"
Erik issued a humorless chuckle. "I didn't."

"What?"

"I was completely under his control, Jane. There was no way I could've made a decision like that. I couldn't even tell you anything I did over the past few days." He shook his head. "If I built that safety into the machine, it was only because Loki wanted me to."

Jane flung open the door to the private suite with more force than necessary, darted through the narrow foyer to the living room, and collapsed into the empty space on the couch beside a startled and very much taken aback Sharon Carter.

"I need your help."

Ever the agent, Sharon regained her composure quickly. She set aside the paperwork she'd been reading, stood, and crossed to a coffee pot on the kitchen bar, gesturing vaguely to the apartment as she went. "Come on in, have a seat. Make yourself at home."

"Sharon…" An hour's worth of anxious energy waiting for nightfall prevented Jane from sitting still. Trailing Sharon across the room, she only stopped when she met the small dining table, gripped the back of a chair. "I'm serious."

Snatching a nearby mug, Sharon snorted. "Yeah, I can tell. Thanks, by the way, for going to the labs during the attack. It's my job right now to keep you safe, so it's nice to know you'll listen to me in an emergency." She paused and tilted her head mid-pour. "Oh, wait…"

"Okay, I get it. I screwed up. Would it make you feel better to say you told me so? Here, I can just do it for you. You were right, I was wrong, and if I'd only listened, I would've never gotten hurt or been—"

Sharon spun around so quickly that a few drops of coffee splashed out of the mug. "You got hurt?"

"It's just a few scratches." Crossing her arms, Jane subtly rubbed at her previously broken ribs without thinking. "I wasn't on the rooftop for long."

"You went to the rooftop? In the middle of a city-wide attack, you went to the rooftop." More coffee sloshed out when the mug connected with the table with more force than necessary. "God, Jane! Are you trying to get yourself killed, or are you just insane? They're going to fire me, for sure."

"Look, I'm sorry for any trouble that causes you, but right now—"

"Let me guess…" Sharon held up a hand exaggeratingly. "You're in a hurry?" A telling silence settled around them for a moment as she massaged her temples with one hand and shook her head. "I've read your file, you know."

It was common knowledge that S.H.I.E.L.D. kept a file on every agent, scientist, or person of interest who crossed their path. What was included in those files, no one except those who pulled them and the few working in records could say. Jane knew that the details of her past weren't in her file. There would've been repercussions by now if they were. Nevertheless, she wasn't sure she wanted to know the specifics of how they viewed her. Was she an asset because of her skills? Or
was she a potential threat because of her associations?

"Up-and-coming astrophysicist on site during a massive atmospheric anomaly in New Mexico gets tangled up in alien politics and ends up a POW in a hostile realm with one other individual. An individual, incidentally, who was never around to corroborate the story." Sharon rested her hands lightly on the back of a chair, a sharp contrast to Jane's white-knuckled grip earlier. "A lot of agents didn't believe you. Don't believe you."

"And you?" If not for the seriousness of the situation, Jane might have chuckled. It was all very figurative, them facing off on opposing sides of the table and all. "What do you think?"

"I think it's fishy any way you look at it, especially when everything about your file raises a whole lot of questions while supplying very few answers. The fact that the guy you were stranded with is the same one who attacked New York doesn't help." Sharon looked down to the chair, traced a finger along its edge. "But I believe you."

In all honesty, it was far more than she'd expected. "I… thank you, Sharon. That means a lot. Really." It was poor luck that she had to test the foundations of that belief so soon. "Hopefully, you won't change your mind."

A wary frown marred Sharon's features when she looked up. "Why are you here? What, exactly, do you need my help with?" It was obvious she already regretted asking even as Jane took a deep breath.

"I just want to talk to him."

Sharon stared at her for one long moment before crumpling, lowering her forehead to the back of the chair. "Oh my god, you are insane."

"Please, Sharon, I know him. I've spent time with him."

"You were together for less than a week."

"Anyone who's survived a life or death situation with another person would say it creates a sort of trust. When you can't watch your own back, you have to trust that someone else will do it for you. That was all we had in Jötunheim, Sharon. Blind faith. That was it. We literally had nothing else to go on." An involuntary shudder rippled its way down her spine at the memory. "You've never experienced that so you can't fully understand – and I hope you never have to – but I am begging you to help me."

"I feel like he brainwashed you, and the crazy is just now coming out. Are you even listening to yourself?" Sharon lifted her head enough to fix Jane with a mystified gaze. "He just killed thousands of people, and you're talking about trust."

"Yes."

"How?"

"Loki saved my life." More times than anyone would ever know, but that was an entirely different matter. "That has to count for something."

Still leaning on the back of the chair, Sharon looked down at the dark splotch of coffee amid the ivory carpet and rubbed the toe of her boot back and forth across it. Beside her, Jane waited nervously. If Sharon refused to help, everything would be significantly more difficult. Not that she'd give up, but getting to Loki would definitely be a challenge.
"Well…" The sudden breach of silence brought Jane's attention back to the agent, and she watched her slowly straighten, hope a miniscule glimmer in the center of the iron fist around her heart. "I suppose if I'm going to be fired anyway."

Jane all but melted with relief. "Thank you." Sharon, however, crossed to the foyer and snagged her jacket from a wall hook, all the while avoiding her eyes.

"Don't thank me just yet."

Getting into the security wing was easy enough. Apparently, Sharon had a friend who worked security that owed her a favor, so every time a camera came into view, they found it conveniently turned the opposite way. Similarly, they only had to wait a few seconds outside the security doors before they slid open.

The lone fluorescent light in the hallway was still flickering as they made their way to the door on the other end. It wasn't locked. Double security controls weren't necessary when the first door was sufficiently formidable, but Sharon wormed between Jane and the door before either of them could open it and crossed her arms.

"You have thirty minutes. Not a second more. If you're not done by then, I'm coming to get you. I'll drag you out, if I have to. Do you understand?"

Jane gave a single nod, the entirety of her focus trained on the reinforced glass pane in the door and the weak hint of light beyond. Somewhere in there was Loki. Somewhere in there were answers. What those answers would be, though, she could only guess. Inhale catching in her throat, she reached for the door handle only to have her hand slapped away.

"Say it, Jane." The breath released in a whoosh as she withdrew her hand. "You have a habit of not listening once your mind is made up, so I want to hear you say it."

"Sharon..." Every delay brought them closer to being caught, but when their eyes met, the agent's expression was unwaveringly stern. There would be no compromise on her end. She may have brought Jane this far, but she wouldn't proceed without this. So it was with a heavy sigh that Jane agreed. "I got it. Thirty minutes or else. I understand."

"Good." Stepping aside, Sharon held the door open. "And I know I've said this before but, please, try not to do anything stupid."

Jane crossed the threshold, heard the door click shut behind her, and advanced quietly. The walkway was bordered by tiles emitting a soft glow, the only source of light in the wing, and extended forward in a straight path through a line of empty cells that increased in level of security the farther she progressed. Bars transitioned from steel to some type of titanium alloy to what might have been either vibranium or adamantium before culminating in a cell that sported only a sheet of what looked like glass but was clearly much more.

It was there that she found him.

Loki sat on the floor in the middle of the cell, knees bent, arms between his legs. His head was lowered and several locks of hair flopped forward to obscure his eyes, but she could still make out a series of gashes and scrapes on his face, a red smear that extended from his nose onto his cheek.
There were an unsettling amount of rents in his surcoat, too, some of which had hardened with dried blood.

Was this to become a staple of theirs? Asgard, Munnr Død, Söngr Fjøll, the rooftop, now… it seemed they could no longer come together without at least one of them being injured, bleeding, or on the verge of dying.

Heart knocking painfully against her ribs, Jane felt suddenly exposed in the middle of the walkway despite being alone and drew closer to the cell on her right. She needed a second to collect herself anyway. The light wavered when she stepped over the tiles, but the brief flicker might have gone unnoticed if it had been anyone else in the cell.

Loki's head shot up, eyes pinning her mid-step.

After a mild sedative had ushered Erik into a dreamless, untroubled sleep, Jane had retreated to her room and spent the entirety of her supper, shower, and a good thirty minutes after trying to line out what all she wanted to say. She'd been content with her planned approach when she finally set out to enlist Sharon's help. Now, though, the words fell flat on her tongue.

The air felt heavier with each passing second – fluid against her skin, viscous in her nose, molasses in her lungs – and Jane vaguely wondered if it was possible to drown in it. With that hard-edged gaze carving a hole into the very center of her being, it certainly felt so. Her chest had tightened to an unbearable degree when a voice pierced the stillness.

"I should have heeded that foolish Midgardian play all those years ago. Who would've guessed it a portent." Loki straightened his legs. "Was this your plan when you begged for my help?"

Released from the shadow of his body, the tiles highlighted a set of cuffs clasped around his wrists. And a thick chain that bound them together. And an ancient hammer that had been placed atop his hands.

"Mjölnir alone would have been sufficient." The chains clinked as Loki tested them lightly. "But your new friends seemed adamant I not escape again."

Easing back to the center of the walkway, Jane couldn't stop looking at Mjölnir and the way Loki's hands disappeared beneath it. The highest security cell, manacles and chains, Mjölnir… S.H.I.E.L.D. was obviously taking no chances the second time around. And while it did feel a little like overkill, at the same time, it didn't. She knew what Loki was capable of.

"Can you blame them?"

Resentment flared unexpectedly, but she tamped it down. It was a typical Jane Foster response. Thor had his lightning, Loki had his magic. If she were to have a superpower, it would be the unfailing ability to be derailed by her emotions. But she couldn't afford that here. Not now. There was a purpose to this visit, and she had to stay calm. What was done was done. She could no more erase the past than she could take things at face value anymore, not when there was more going on than met the eye. She needed to stay focused.

"I, um… I never got the chance to thank you. For healing me back on the roof." Unable to hold the intensity of his gaze, Jane watched her fingers toy with her shirt hem instead. "You didn't have to do that."

"How very gracious of you to come all this way to offer appreciation."
The blatant sarcasm made her brows furrow, regardless of the ongoing mantra to stay calm, to not let him get under her skin as he'd always been prone to do. "That's not why I'm here."

"Of course it isn't." There was an unsettling stillness to Loki's features when Jane looked up, surprised. "No, I know why you're here."

"Oh?"

"You're here for the rest of me, are you not? You've taken my purpose, my freedom, and once I've been returned to the Realm Eternal, my life. Now you have come for what remains. What will it be this time? My flesh? Others have taken their due, but you're welcome to what's left. Or is it my mind you seek?" Loki snorted, lip curling. "By all means, take it. It has dwelt on you far too long as it is. I'd be glad to finally be rid of it."

For lack of anything better to do, Jane wrapped her arms around her waist. "Please don't be like that."

"Did you believe I would welcome you with open arms? Should I also play at forgiveness for your part in this?" Loki rattled the chains for effect.

"My part?" The hold on her emotions slipped infinitesimally, her mouth falling open. "How the hell is any of this my fault?"

"Everything was going as planned. Midgard would be under my rule if only you hadn't—"

"I seem to remember you seeking me out! But now you're going to try and blame me for—"

"You've never been anything more than a distraction. If not for you, the beast—"

"Right, so it's my fault you couldn't hold your own against—"

"You fed me lies—"

"I asked for your help—"

"You manipulated me into—"

"God, you're pathetic!" Their shared tirade cut off abruptly, the jumble of their words reverberating in the empty corridor. Only when the echoes began to fade did Jane continue more softly. "You did this, Loki. There's no one to blame but yourself."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few more degrees. "I did this?"

"Yes!" Jane raked a hand through her hair. "All I wanted was to protect my city or planet or realm or whatever you want to call it. All you wanted to do was destroy it."

"If you hadn't interfered, I could have saved Midgard."

"By killing thousands of innocent people? That scepter wasn't exactly a white flag."

"Don't be dramatic, Jane. Thousands of mortals die every day without any help whatsoever. If the mortals only knew what comes for them, the fate that waits in the wings…” Loki shrugged, cool and indifferent. "They would have welcomed me on bended knee."

The latter point of his comment nagged at her, but she ignored it in favor of the former. It made her sick, the ease with which he wrote off the deaths he would've caused. "That's not the point! We
shouldn't have to choose at all. How can you claim your motives were pure?"

"I would have ruled peacefully."

Jane huffed a laugh. "No one wearing a crown comes in the name of peace, Loki."

A soft creak sounded from down the wing, and Jane spun on her heel. She half-expected to see Sharon in the doorway telling her they needed to leave. Distracted by the argument, it was hard to know how much time had already passed. Thankfully, though, the wing was empty. When she turned back, Loki was regarding her keenly, one brow raised.

"Expecting someone?"

Jane studied him for a moment – the defined features, the air of confidence, the haughty smirk she knew so well – and frowned. It was like swimming through the haze of amnesia again. She knew the man who sat before her, and yet, she didn't. Then again, hadn't that always been the case? Maybe the number of years and time spent together didn't matter. Maybe Loki would always be a complete and utter mystery to her.

"I have… no idea how to trust you anymore. I don't even know what to believe. One minute you're going to destroy all the realms because of a story; the next, you're going to save us and rule peacefully. You say we would've chosen you if we knew…" Jane shook her head. "But the thing is, we don't. I only know what you tell me, which has always been next to nothing."

"You think yourself better?" The chains jangled when Loki shifted, leaning towards her. "I am not the only one in this room keeping secrets."

"That's completely different. Mine are—"

"Yes, let's hear how the nature of your circumstances provide vindication for the lies you've told." Loki's smirk withered into a sneer. "Don't fool yourself, Jane. We're no different at all, you and I. Tell me, does anyone know the truth of you?"

The answer ground painfully over her teeth. "No."

"Has anyone ever known?"

Jane glared as an angry flush crept up her neck to her cheeks. "You know as well as I do that I couldn't tell anyone." He was backing her into a corner, and she was powerless to prevent it.

"Not even Thor." It was remarkable, the amount of venom that could be injected into a single word. "Though, I must admit I was surprised you hadn't told your friend. The one who saved your life… what was his name?"

Something in the back of Jane's mind went deadly still. "Don't."

"Erik, I think it was."

"You…" The distance between them disappeared as she crossed to the cell without thinking, fists clenched, voice tight with barely-controlled fury. "You shouldn't even be allowed to say his name after what you did."

Unfazed, Loki tracked her movements. "Or have you?"

"Of course I haven't told him!" She stopped only a couple feet from the cell, muscles trembling with
the urge to strike the glass. "And I never will, if I can help it."

"Then we are on par." Looking exceedingly smug, Loki lifted his chin. "You merely refuse to accept our similarities."

"You controlled one of my closest friends, Loki. You used him. You pulled apart everything he is, took what you wanted, and pieced him back together. And what's worse is you knew who he was to me. You knew, and you used him anyway." The sting of fingernails gouging into her palms helped steady her. Even still, it took several ragged breaths before she could speak without the threat of yelling. "I am nothing like you."

They remained that way for some time. Both on edge, both glaring daggers… approximately ten feet of space stretched between them, but it might as well have been ten thousand. They were like glaciers, grinding against each other. They didn't know how to live peacefully anymore, no longer knew quite how to be around one another without tearing the other apart. Eventually, though, her fury tempered. She always had been the first to burn out.

Jane sat on the floor, closed her eyes, and blew out an exhausted sighed.

So much for not letting him get to her.

So much for staying calm.

"Look, I didn't come here to argue with you. I just… I needed to…" But the words wouldn't form. They lodged somewhere in the hollow of her throat like tar, and defeated, Jane hid her face in her hands. She'd been wrong. She couldn't do this. "This was a mistake. I never should've come."

"That is most likely true."

Her disparaging laugh sounded tinny in her ears. "Would you rather me have not come at all?"

"Perhaps." The chains rattled again, accompanied by a rustling of fabric, as Loki settled back into his prior position. "Do you hate me?"

"Yes."

And she did. No matter the evolution of their relationship, a small part of her had always hated him for what he'd done to her, the things he'd subjected her to, whether intentionally or not. Sometimes she hated him so fiercely that it took her breath away. But she also loved him just as fiercely… not in the naïve sense of fairytales but the crippling way that stabbed at the soul.

Gritting her teeth, Jane pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. "And no."

What ever happened to simplicity? Happy endings weren't commonplace when she was growing up, but it wasn't exactly unheard of either. Her parents had been happy once, before sickness had fractured their family. Others had been, too. Even those caught up in wars and oppressive regimes had found contentment. She'd watched it happen time and again throughout the centuries.

She could have had that. At twenty-eight, she'd been older than some of the other girls in their village, but she could have found a husband, married, bore children. She could have settled into some semblance of simplicity. She could have been happy. She should have been happy. Instead, she was…

"Jane." All the vehemence was gone from his voice – it was that more than anything that drew her gaze – and when she found him in the low light, he seemed as drained as she felt. He'd never looked
so human. "Why are you here?"

There was really no point in beating around the bush anymore. Not after everything else that had been said. Jane pulled her legs to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees. "Did you try to close the portal?"

"Well, well…" Loki's head canted to the side. "That's one I haven't heard yet."

"Your scepter was the only way to deactivate the machine. That's what Erik told me." Technically, the first mention of it had come from Thor, but it was unlikely that any mention of the God of Thunder would go over well. "You had it when we were on the rooftop, and you took it when you left. Next thing I know, Agent Romanoff is using it to close the portal."

"Is there a point to any of this?"

"I asked you to stop what you were doing." Jane swallowed thickly. "I think that, when you left, you planned to shut down the machine."

The corners of Loki's mouth quirked in amusement. "That is a… fascinating theory." Although his tone implied it was anything but.

"You forget that I know you, Loki. Maybe not everything, but I know enough. A lot more than most. You may have done some terrible things, but you're not half as bad as you try to make people think you are." It was a shame she was the only one who might ever understand that. "Why else would you have gone anywhere near Stark Tower? Why else would Erik have built a failsafe into the machine unless you wanted him to?"


Jane shook her head. "You don't believe in chance."

"No… I don't."

As if on cue, the door to the wing opened. It wasn't without considerable effort that Jane wrenched her gaze away to glance behind her. The stream of light from the hallway didn't quite reach them in the far depths of the cells, but Sharon's voice did. "Time's up, Jane."

"Just give me…" Jane scrambled to her feet. "I just need five more minutes."

"Not happening. Shift change is in less than an hour." The door opened a little wider, Sharon's form a shadow against the light. "If you don't like the idea of getting caught, we need to go now."

"You think by closing the portal that means Midgard is safe?" When she turned back to Loki, there was no hint of teasing in his expression. Not anymore. He stared at her with unnerving intensity. "We are no longer the only pieces occupying the game board. Far bigger things than you or I are now at play."

"What do you mean? Are you talking about the frost giants?"

"Please…" Loki scoffed. "A thousand years will pass before the jötnar rally behind another leader as strong as Laufey or Skaði. No, they pose no threat."

The sound of the door clicking shut was soon replaced by the combined steady thud of boots and grumbling as Sharon made her way down the corridor. Knowing she was almost out of time, Jane stepped closer to the cell, voice barely a whisper, conviction already winding a burning path through
her veins. "The fire giants."

"Fate is not bound by bridges or science or even the Bi-Frost. It cannot be stopped." Not once did Loki's focus stray to the approaching agent. It well near consumed her, grey-green devouring her whole. "He will make his move when the Convergence begins. By then, it will be too late."

Jane stood frozen to the spot, wide-eyed and heart racing, when Sharon's hand closed around her elbow. "Let's go." The grip was strong enough to bruise, although she wouldn't feel the ache until after the adrenaline had worn off.

"Wait, I—"

"No. I shouldn't have helped you in the first place. We shouldn't be here." Sharon gave a forceful tug. "See if I let you talk me into anything like this again."

Years in a science lab had made Jane somewhat soft, but the centuries that came before ensured she could hold her own if need be. No matter how badly she wished to stay, though, she couldn't bring herself to fight Sharon as she had Agent Hartmann and his cohorts.

Allowing herself to be guided, Jane walked backward down the length of the wing. "Too late for what? Loki, what Convergence?"

"You might hate me for what I've done to your people, Jane. You might even hate the fact that I am unable to tell you everything you wish to know." His voice trailed her the entire way, his figure a shrinking black and green shadow in the center of the dimly-lit cell. "But you will never understand all I have sacrificed for you."

For the next couple days, Jane meandered Stark Tower in a semi-daze. She talked when spoken to and helped when requested, but if asked, she couldn't remember what had comprised her day. She might as well have been walking through a constant fog. It wasn't until she stood in a secluded park with Thor, somewhat removed from the rest of the assembly that had gathered, that she fully came back to herself.

"Several things require my attention in Asgard. Unrest has been building among the realms after the events of Jötunheim. Hugin and Munin echo rumors of war. As much as I wish it false, I fear something is happening behind the scenes."

Jane's gaze flicked over Thor's shoulder to the bound and gagged figure in the center of the group.

"However…" Thor closed the gap between them, stepping so close she could feel the heat emanating from his chest, and cupped her cheek in one hand. "I promise to return for you, Jane, as soon as I am able."

Without any other warning, he leaned down and caught her in a kiss. It was chaste – tame, even, compared to some she'd experienced – but the sensation lingered long after he'd pulled away. Eyes still closed, Jane ran her tongue over her lower lip. Where Loki tasted of wind, cedar, and freshly fallen snow, Thor tasted like sunlight. Sunlight and wheat and metal. The color amber, too, if colors could have a taste.
Thor pulled her into an embrace, cheek pressed to her temple. "Think of me."

"I will." Leaning back ever so slightly, Jane laid a hand on his chest. "You be careful out there."

"Always."

Mjölnir bumped against her as they separated. That's what she thought, at least, until the container that housed the cube – Tesseract, her mind automatically corrected – slid around the curve of her thigh. A shiver raised the hair on her arms at the contact. If she didn't know any better, she'd say it almost felt like a caress.

Jane wended through the handful of agents to stand with Erik. As Thor approached the group people had recently began dubbing The Avengers, Tony Stark made a comment. Thor's retort must have been witty because it elicited several chuckles. She wouldn't know, though. She was too distracted by the whispers in the back of her mind to pay attention.

The voices were the same as before. Dark and seductive and strangely familiar… it beckoned, called to her in a way she couldn't describe. With a twitch, she rolled her shoulders to dispel something only she could hear, and found Loki through the small crowd. Not that that was any better. It was hard to take him in. The cuffs, chains, and gag were bad enough. His glare was even worse. Clearly, Tony wasn't the only one to see Thor's goodbye kiss.

Pulling the length of her ponytail over her shoulder, Jane fiddled with the ends. Loki's words had haunted her constantly since their discussion. Fire giants, fate, the Convergence… what did it all mean? She knew the fire giants, among others, were supposed to usher in Ragnarök, but what about the Convergence? That was something new. And what had Loki sacrificed for her?

"Erik, can I ask you something?" Beside her, Erik issued a noncommittal grunt she took for a yes. "You said the Tesseract showed you things while you were under Loki's influence. What kind of things did you see?"

"Some were great. Landscapes from other worlds, families spending time together, the potential of Earth if it were in the right hands. It showed me the birth of an entire galaxy and the calculations of how to use its power to get there." A pained look flitted across his face. "But others were terrible. I don't know if they were dreams or visions, but I don't think I'll ever be able to forget them."

"In one, I was running through these underground tunnels. A woman was screaming, but I couldn't find her. No matter how hard I ran, I never seemed to get any closer. She…" Erik shuddered. "I would've sworn it sounded like you."

The voices had taken up their whispering again.

"I was in a field in another one. There was smoke everywhere, and I kept tripping on things in the grass because I couldn't see. People were fighting all around me. Sometimes it ended there, but other times something would start chasing me." Jane stared up at Erik, absorbed in the recount. "I don't know if they were dreams or visions, but I don't think I'll ever be able to forget them."

"She?"

"Yes…" Erik's tone transitioned into something akin to awe. "She was incredible. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I thought my heart was going to burst from my chest just looking at her. She had this gold armor and a sword and… and she was so strong. She killed that thing like it was
nothing. She saved me."

A gust of wind swept through the clearing. The flutter of Thor’s cape snagged Jane’s attention, and she watched it swell and fall. Tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, she listened to the faint sound of Nick Fury sending off the two princes.

"If they were visions, I don't know what they were supposed to mean. There was one where I was just holding a dandelion. In every direction there was nothing but white. I looked away for a second, and when I looked back, the dandelion was gone. Instead, I was holding a pile of ash with a lotus on top." Erik rubbed the back of his neck. "You don't think it was real, do you? The things I saw?"

Now more isolated in the clearing, Thor extended one end of the Tesseract’s container to Loki who grabbed the handle. Then he dipped his chin in a farewell to the group. There was a split-second of hesitation that Jane instinctively knew was him waiting for her to look to him. However, she had eyes only for Loki.

"I wouldn't worry about them, Erik. I'm sure they were just dreams."

A blue light suddenly surrounded the pair. It was painfully bright but didn't last for more than a few seconds, and once the light had faded, they were gone. They’d been sent back to a realm that was beyond reach until the Bi-Frost had been rebuilt, returned to a kingdom that would praise one and punish the other because they didn’t know the full truth.

And Jane – who did know the truth, who knew what Loki had at least attempted to do – did nothing but watch them leave with a sick feeling in her stomach and the memory of Loki’s betrayed gaze burned into her mind.

Jane Foster knew a great many things. As one of the most renowned astrophysicists of the twenty-first century, she knew how to track atmospheric anomalies and quantify the readings into maps and charts that revealed the events’ progression through deep space. She knew that other realms existed beyond her own and that people had the ability to create an Einstein-Rosen bridge. She also knew that Loki, in spite of his dancing around the issue, had left her on that rooftop to try and close the portal himself. And yet, for all her degrees and research and experience, there were many things Jane didn't know.

She didn't know that, in the depths of Asgard, a fallen prince was facing his judgment of an endless eternity alone.

She didn't know that, in the ruins of a realm never meant to exist, a titan was putting a plan into place.

She didn't know that, in the expanse of a fiery land, a giant was gathering an army.

“War and wisdom, peace and life... the stories of war are written by the victors.”

Chapter End Notes
And thus ends the second arc!

Just a few things to note – Thor’s still in the dark regarding Jane and Loki’s shared past for now, but don’t think for a second that Jane will get away with that forever. In the end, Loki is a jealous being. He won’t let that secret continue for long, especially since Jane is involved.

And speaking of secrets… if you’re frustrated with Jane keeping silent at Loki’s expense, you’re not alone. It’s a pretty low move on her part. Remember, though, that she’s human. I love a strong female character as much as the next person, but perfection isn’t realistic. Jane, as much as I love her, will make mistakes. Give her some time. She’s just panicking a little bit right now at the thought of deviating from what’s been her norm for the past thousand years.

As for the issue of Loki’s motives, I have a hard time believing there wasn’t some measure of premeditation on his part during the whole scepter-machine-portal incident. If he orchestrated everything, how else would Erik have built in a safety mechanism if not because Loki wanted it? It all seems a bit too convenient.

Lastly, if Loki’s comment about that foolish Midgardian play being a portent seems important, it’s because it is. Hang in there! All will be revealed in the third arc.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Thirty-Two

“There is nothing left to burn. Nothing left but you.”

2012: The Void

It took only a single moment. Ground gave way to space, wind to stillness, snow to stars. In the span of a blink, Jane disappeared and the displacement of energy propelled him off the edge of the world… and then he was falling. Loki twisted in midair. The massive wedge of ice upon which Jötunheim was formed grew smaller while the darkness grew larger. It yawned before him, empty and endless.

The Void.

No sign of life glimmered within its scope. No stars or moon, sun or planets. Those distant galaxies that had dotted the outer rim of space belonging to Jötunheim stopped abruptly at the Void’s edge, winking out as if they’d never existed at all, and in their absence, there was only a disquieting sense of inevitability. The jötnar were right in calling it a grave.

Already Loki could feel himself compressing, suffocating beneath the weight. The pressure ground his bones into dust even as his body lengthened and stretched, distorted by something far stronger than gravity. In the brief second before Jötunheim disappeared, he located the nearest of Yggdrasil’s seams, but the magnetic draw of the Void ensured escape was impossible. The tighter he grasped the shrinking window, the quicker it slipped through his fingers.

Then the inky depths devoured him completely.

As a whole, it was similar to being submerged. He could make out nothing but darkness, and while he still possessed freedom of movement, everything felt thicker, sluggish… like being encased in molasses instead of water. So preoccupied was he that it took several moments to realize that was all he felt.

The wounds he’d sustained in Jötunheim were still there, of course, and the pain flared to life...
whenever he shifted. Similarly, the bone-deep exhaustion that had been weighing on his mind ever since Jane unexpectedly crashed her way back into his life had not faded in the slightest. But it wasn't a physical or mental discomfort that had given him pause. No, what had disappeared was far more disconcerting than that.

It was the lack of response when he extended one hand into the emptiness.

For the first time in as long as he could remember, there was nothing. He could no more sense the seiðr supposedly built into the Void than he could see his own hand. Neither could he feel its familiar slide over his fingertips. It was as if it refused to heed his call altogether, as if it had ceased to exist.

Had he been wrong? Seiðr was instilled in every aspect of the realms. Even the most mundane of objects bore its mark. It hadn't been a stretch to presume something as intricate as the Void would be laced with it. Something so complex would practically be a given. And yet it was worryingly, alarmingly, glaringly absent.

Loki dug two fingers into the laceration on his side. Pain was one of the quickest methods of inciting seiðr, and he hoped to spur it to action as something dangerously akin to desperation quickened his breaths. But he would be left wanting. There was nothing more than an arc of pain across his vision, bright yet empty. That which had been his constant companion for centuries on end was gone.

It was then he knew he was well and truly caught.

Time passed. Or what felt like time, at least. The wayward constructs of the Void were already at play – they had to be – he just wasn't aware in what capacity. He could have been stranded for a few seconds or a few minutes. A few days. Maybe, even, years. He might be floating motionless in the same location where he'd first arrived, or he might be hurtling through the oblivion. All were valid possibilities.

He'd once described the Void to Jane as a place that operated beyond rhyme or reason. No end, no time, no gravity, and no easy means of escape. It had been a relatively simple explanation for something that was anything but, especially compared to the interweaving stories he'd been told as a child.

Ginnungagap. That was the traditional name for the Void in the tales of old. A bottomless and chaotic abyss, it was all that existed in the beginning and it was all that would remain at the end of all things. The formation of Yggdrasil had temporarily divided the abyss between order and disarray, but that which was wild and anarchic would always seek a way to rise again. It was the Void's constant objective, to drag the entirety of Yggdrasil back into its fold. And so it melded seamlessly with his own story.

Ragnarök, which would destroy the realms and eventually bring them back into Ginnungagap.

Ragnarök, which he was fated to begin himself.

That was what everything returned to. Fate. For a time, Jane had begun to sway his beliefs, allowed him to think there was more to their existence than preordained acts and inescapable outcomes. But he'd been wrong. Wrong, foolish, and uncharacteristically naïve. Such idealistic, human thoughts would not plague him again.
Everything about them had been destined from the beginning. He knew that now with certainty. Their initial meeting, her desire to unravel the magic of Yggdrasil's seams using science, his need to prove he was more than his heritage, the ebb and flow of their entire relationship… all had been written beforehand, from the placement of the rock in Stora Karlsö to him choosing her all those centuries ago.

If not for him, she never would've survived her injuries as a mortal or made a career out of studying the stars. If not for her, he never would've come to terms with the part he was to play in Ragnarök or been distracted from his assault on Thor long enough to be thwarted.

If she hadn't been in Jötunheim, he never would've been tossed into the Void. But then, if she hadn't been in Jötunheim, he would likely still be suffering Skaði's wrath beneath the serpent in Munr Død.

Jane might never have prompted Thor's change of heart if her studies hadn't led her straight to him, which meant Loki's rule of Asgard might have gone unchallenged. However, she'd only been alive to meet Thor in the first place because of his own actions with Iðunn's apple. How ironic that, in the end, Loki had effectively orchestrated his own downfall.

It was an odd thing to realize just how closely their fates intertwined. Over time, they had impacted each other's lives so completely that there was no longer any way of separating them. There was no him without her, no her without him. There was only them, two immortals weaving their way through the years and dancing to the tune of fate's beat.

He wondered if the Norns realized the extent of what they'd done.

What a tangled mess they had created.

What an intricate web they had spun.

Loki closed his eyes. There was little use in rehashing their history or speculating what the Norns planned next. All he knew was that their story was far from over. So long as Jane harbored the item, the fire giants would seek her, and so long as he drew breath, he was destined to meet the sons of Muspel in Ragnarök. Eventually, an opportunity for escape would present itself, reality would resume, and they would all continue their slow march toward fate.

Until then, he could wait.

He had nothing but time.

The trouble with time, though, was that it provided too great an opportunity to think. Loki had always believed himself above the curse of sentimentality. It was a weakness he refused to suffer. But denial was a wicked thing and only made it all the worse when his mind began to dredge up the past, reminisce over things better left forgotten.

Frigga, for example.

What good came of recalling the countless centuries she spent instructing him? How she, above all others, had been the one to bestow upon him the gift of seiðr, sense the inherent talent and nurture it into something that would define him? He didn't want to remember her proud smile when magic first
yielded to his will.

Neither did he want to relive moments with Thor, Sif, and the Warriors Three. The victorious battles against impossible odds, the moments of celebration that followed. He didn't want to remember concocting grand tales of adventure as a child in the darkness of a shared room with someone he'd once called brother.

More than anything, he didn't want to remember the All-Father.

He didn't want to remember the two of them studying the various engravings in the Bi-Frost dome for hours on end, patient answers given in response to his many questions of the realms. He didn't want to remember the year he'd finally been deemed old enough to take part in Oskoreia. The thrill he'd felt as he gathered his weapons, mounted his steed, and journeyed out with the rest of the members of the Wild Hunt.

He didn't want to remember the first time he'd had to clean the blood of an enemy from his weapons. How the All-Father had come to him alone in his chambers, taken several of the daggers from his trembling hands, and helped him wipe down the blades. Told him that taking a life would become easier but that it should never become easy. Said that readiness to defend his realm, his crown, and his loved ones from those who would move against them was a crucial step in becoming a man, a true Prince of Asgard.

No, Loki didn't want to remember.

But he did, nevertheless.

At some point, his wounds healed.

The scrapes and bruises disappeared. The gashes closed and scabbed and scarred and faded until only the stain of blood remained. It was the natural way of things – the human way – and had been his only way to judge the passing of time in the Void. Now he had nothing.

And still, he floated on.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, he wondered if any of the beings banished to the Void ever encountered each other or if it was their destiny to suffer the endless stretch of eternity in isolation, gradually losing all hope of deliverance, slowly going mad.

And still, he floated on.

Sometime after that, Jane appeared before him.
She hung in the nothingness. The silvery light of a nonexistent moon had bathed her in brilliance and clothed her in starlight. She was luminous. Radiant. He couldn't help but reach for her. But as he extended a hand, night began to ink its way across her body like dye in water. It diluted the light until only a weak, cold, remnant of the glow remained.

She turned her face briefly to a now-dying moon he could not see before meeting his own gaze once more. There was a hint of something there, in the depths of her eyes. Disappointment, maybe? The echoing haunt of loneliness? Pity? It was too profound to be merely sadness. Her mouth was moving, too, but he couldn't make out the words.

Without warning, the surface of her skin began to splinter, darkness spilling out of the cracks instead of meat and bone. It flaked off in paper-thin strips one by one until nothing remained, only a confetti of Jane hovering in the air around him that disintegrated to a shimmering dust all at once – stardust; she who had always been made of stars, returned home – and the whisper of what might have been her voice.

*You will be the death of me.*

Then the vision was gone and he was alone again.

And still, he floated on.

On
and on
and on
and on
until…

He almost missed it at first. Nothing had changed – he was still drifting aimlessly, immersed in the darkness, alone – except that something *had* changed. Shifted, rather. It skipped along the edges of his awareness, and scarcely daring to breathe, Loki rotated towards the call. He lifted one hand. And there it was.

Seiðr.

Magic.

And at its center, a tear in the fabric of the Void.

Loki didn't so much as catch hold of the opening as it caught hold of him, inching forward like a living thing to envelop his hand and yank him through. There was the fleeting sense of unease as he traded one form of darkness for another, an almost sinister weight of inevitability, but then he was
slipping free of the Void, dropping into a graveyard of stars, and riding gravity towards a crater-pocked planet.

It was on a narrow outcropping midway down the slope of one of those craters that he eventually landed, only to be immediately set upon by a horde of creatures he couldn't identify. They emerged from both a series of caves formed along the entirety of the crater wall with guttural cries, swarming across the jagged surface like animals, and over the crater's edge on gliders that shone cobalt in the twilight.

Naturally, he resisted. Transitioning from the Void had left him drained but not so much that he was unable to defend himself, and the return of his seiðr helped even the odds despite their greater number. The reptilian humanoids were stabbed, disemboweled, and tossed into the crater by the dozens. Those who hung back suddenly found themselves in the midst of landslides or disabling winds.

Resolve was a powerful ally. Too much time as of late had been spent as a prisoner – the Void, Munnr Død, even, in a sense, Asgard – and he had no intention of doing so again. Not without a fight. Not when one of Yggdrasil's seams lay so tantalizingly close. It called to him even in the heart of battle, a blaze within the desolate planet, but the creatures were too close. He needed more space to slip through it. And so, with its allure a constant presence in his thoughts, Loki redoubled his efforts, focus narrowing into something deadly.

No longer could he feel the energy blast strike home between his shoulder blades or the charged bayonet find his thigh. His world had condensed to nothing more than the keen edge of armor on one hand and the greasy smear of innards on the other, the warm spray of blood on his face, the raw power as he manipulated the elements around them, the way his blood would sing with every metallic shriek of steel on steel.

However, that very same focus would also be his undoing.

Caught up in the battle, he didn't register the approaching figure and the readiness that rippled through the throng like a wave at its arrival until it was too late. There was a whisper in the back of his mind, the oppressive weight of something primordial, a flash of light… and then nothing.

"He's not a dvergr."

"One of the ljósálfar?"

"The light of Alfheim does not flow in his veins."

"A dökkálfr, then?"

"No," All fell silent at the new voice. It differed from the thick dialect of the creatures and resonated throughout the space without effort. "This one is made of a different form of darkness. He is an Æsir."

A chorus of jeers rang out – Asgardian scum – while the butt ends of several weapons connected with Loki's ribcage. Others continued to mock and stamp their feet even as one of the creatures drew close to the last speaker and whispered beneath the ruckus in a raspy voice.
"We can put him in the badlands, my Lord. Give him to the varðmaðr."

The one who could only be the creatures' leader didn't respond. Instead, he knelt silently beside Loki. That same power that had bested him in battle still had hold of Loki, prevented him from moving or even opening his eyes, although he remained very much aware of his captor. His was an immense and unmistakable presence, ancient in its vastness. But it was also unnatural. Whatever power he wielded, it was not entirely his own.

"I know who you are." Something skimmed the surface of Loki's mind. "Laufeyson, Odinson, God of Lies and Destroyer of Worlds… you are a wolf in sheep's clothing. The great deceiver. Better dead than alive, to most." Whatever had been probing his thoughts withdrew as the leader stood. "But I am not most. And I might have use of you yet."

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He was a titan.

Self-proclaimed ruler of the space between Yggdrasil's branches, leader of an armed race called the Chitauri, and fabled courter of Death, his name was Thanos.

It was the kind of name uttered in shadowed tavern corners. One of the last sons of the Eternals, he had supposedly been banished to the Void for the perversion of sacred artifacts and crimes against his people in the early years, before the reign of Odin or his father or his father before him. Loki had occasionally caught mention of the name during his travels but never accepted it as anything other than an exaggerated yarn.

The truth, as it were, was sobering because Thanos was very real indeed. In the Realm Between Realms, he'd risen from the ashes. He had gradually amassed an army, collected treasures both new and ancient, and waited patiently, biding his time until the realms were ready. A game of strategy. Moves and countermoves.

It was under his orders that a handful of the Chitauri drug Loki back to their city of ruins and bound him to a post in a razed clearing.

He was held there without food or water while the creatures periodically bombarded him with a blend of insults and slurs. At one point, two Chitauri youth even dared to smear excrement on his face and clothes. Loki was distinctly reminded of the early years of Jane's immortality, when punishment consisted of being held in stocks and subjected to the townspeople's scorn. For possessing such advanced weaponry, they were a primitive race.

But he refused to beg. Even as the days blurred into weeks and his body turned on itself for fuel and his throat burned with thirst, he would not give them the satisfaction. This was not his first imprisonment. He had survived the poison of Jötunheim's great serpent. If they wanted to break him, they would have to do better than that.

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"The Tesseract has awakened. I heard its call the moment it was first unearthed. It searches for its lost brothers." Thanos stood in the clearing, hands clasped behind his back, eyes on the network of stars
overhead. "Have you felt it?"

The atmosphere had been charged during those final moments in Jötunheim. Electric. Jane had experienced it even more fully than he, though her notion of the cause had only been partially true. No mere portal or pathway between the realms would have that specific essence, despite what she wanted to believe. It was a shame, to see a mind as exceptional as hers be constantly limited by the boundaries of science.

Loki’s throat worked in a dry swallow, voice hoarse with disuse. "I have."

"The Midgardians do not know what they possess. They might have an impression, but they can neither appreciate the depths of its abilities nor fully harness them. A power such as that is wasted in the hands of humans." Thanos nodded once. "It would be better suited elsewhere."

"And you believe that to be with you?"

"You disagree?" For the first time since the titan arrived and sent away the group of Chitauri that had been standing around the clearing, their gazes met. "We are beings meant for greatness, you and I. Fate has written our stories in the stars."

Loki let his head fall back against the post. "I have heard nothing of your story."

"Is Asgard not meant to burn? Has it not been prophesied that the realms will fall into despair?"

"The tales of Ragnarök are not your own." A frown stole across his face, furrowed his brow. "You have no place in the end of the realms."

"And yet it is the realms themselves who tell my past, present, and future." There was an almost feverish gleam to Thanos' eyes, a disconcerting intensity. "Every five thousand years, Yggdrasil comes together in a great alignment where the fabric of reality thins. Each of those instances charts my movement through the ages."

"There is little need for flourish. Speak plainly, titan, or do not speak at all."

The corners of Thanos' mouth twitched as he began to pace. "I was born in the midst of one of the first Convergences. I took vengeance on those who had wronged me during the next. I forced my way from the Void and took control of this space, this Realm Between Realms, during another."

"And the last? It might have been before my time, but I am familiar with the history of the realms." The reply was laced with disdain. Prisoner or not, he was weary of being treated like an ignorant child. "Malekith led the campaign against Asgard, not you."

"Indeed, he did." A proud smirk was cast his way. "But who do you think set him on that path? It was not by his own wits that Malekith came to possess the Aether."

It was the answer to a longtime question. To the warrior-honoring Asgardians, victory and how it came about was always more important than the motivations or methods of the would-be usurper. But Loki was neither a traditional warrior nor an Asgardian. He'd ended his studies with several unanswered questions, one of which being where the dark elves of Svartalfheim had discovered such a weapon.

Now he knew.

"I was too early, though. The realms were not yet ready to fall. But now…" Thanos paused, something more earnest overtaking his expression. "Events long foretold have been placed into
motion. That they align with the coming Convergence cannot be coincidence. You see it now, don't you? How connected our paths are."

Many centuries ago, Jane told him how humans would wish on falling stars. It was an idiotic tradition, one he'd admonished her mercilessly for taking part in. Now, though… what he wouldn't give for the return of his seiðr. For the chance to put this titan in his place and escape the hell he'd unwittingly stumbled into.

However, whatever Thanos had done in the battle had continually kept his magic at bay. Even now, it danced teasingly out of reach, close enough to sense but not close enough to utilize. It was worse than the Void. There, at least, he hadn't felt it at all. Here, it was a phantom limb. And so, powerless to do anything else, Loki turned to the expectant titan with a sneer.

"You really are mad."

Face twisting in fury, Thanos issued a savage growl, stepped forward, and backhanded Loki in one smooth motion. Blood filled his mouth on impact as a white-hot pain ricocheted around his head. He kept his wits about him through the hurt, though, enough to recognize there was more to the blow than just brute strength.

"You dare call me that?" Thanos grasped a handful of his hair and wrenched his head upright. "I could kill you, insolent whelp. You're a prize to be sure, but not a necessary one. I would not overestimate your importance."

Loki couldn't resist a wet, sardonic chuckle. "Then, by all means, do so. I am tired of your posturing and threats."

Anger rolled off the titan in waves, but he released Loki, flinging his head to the side before stalking a few paces away. The sudden commotion had drawn a handful of Chitauri from their hiding places. They clung to the shadows that surrounded the clearing now like ghosts, predators waiting to pounce.

"There will be no joining of paths. By my hands, Ragnarök will cover the realms. None will be spared, not even you in this hidden space. All will perish in fire and—"

"Ah, yes, the notorious alliance between Laufeyson and Muspelheim." Thanos' rage had been replaced by a shrewd acknowledgement. "Except there won't be an alliance with the sons of Muspel, will there? After affronting Surtur, the only way they will have you is in pieces with your head on a stake."

A muscle in Loki's jaw twitched.

"Yes, I know they search for you. They have been for quite some time now." With the air of someone who has already won, Thanos gestured to the expanse of stars. "It would be a simple thing, to alert them of your whereabouts. They cannot find their way here on their own, but were I to help them…"

There was no doubt what would happen if Surtur were to seize him. The tortures in Jötunheim would seem mild by comparison. More concerning, though, was how Thanos had discovered his connection with the sons of Muspel.

Few knew of their altercations. Jane, of course, but with the secret of her immortality at stake, she had no one to tell. The jötnar did, as well – Skaði had revealed as much – but that was probably only due to their longstanding ties as cousin races. It was unlikely word had spread beyond that. Surtur
wouldn't want the realms to learn he'd been slighted, much less that the culprit had fled unscathed.

So how had the titan acquired that information?

"You have been running on borrowed time, Laufeyson. How will you bring about Ragnarök without an ally? You cannot take on the realms by yourself." Thanos was crouching before him now. "Help me retrieve the Tesseract. Bring the Infinity Stone to me, and I will help you fulfill your destiny."

Anticipation slipped through the circle of Chitauri like a wave. It was palpable. Loki watched it spread from one to the next until the entire group was infected with it, a literal hum in the background. They wanted a war. Craved it. And he could be the one to lead them to it. Complete what he was always meant to do.

Except…

Straightening as much as the fetters would allow, Loki spat blood onto the dust-covered earth at Thanos' feet. "If you are so powerful, retrieve it yourself. My fate will be fulfilled regardless. I'll have no part in yours."

"Proud to a fault." There was no surprise to the statement as the titan stood. If anything, it appeared he'd been expecting the rejection. "You will hear me, Lie-Smith. In the end, you will see the truth." Spinning on his heel, Thanos strode to the edge of the clearing, pausing only long enough to address a cloaked figure. "Silence him."

The vizier motioned to Loki.

The Chitauri surged forward as one.

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They sewed his mouth shut first.

Then they stripped him, drove spikes through his hands to secure him between two columns, and whipped him until the ground was slick with blood and he could barely stand. They paraded him through their city, made him crawl amongst crowds that taunted him and pelted him with filth and refuse. They tortured him systematically, everything from slivers beneath nails to burning the soles of feet to carving his many sins into the unmarked flesh that remained.

Then they gave him one day's rest to heal before doing it all over again.

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"Why do you resist? Bastard son left to die, forsaken by not just one father but two… what do you have to protect? A family who never wanted you? Who deceived you? Who promised you greatness and then cast you aside? Theirs is a legacy of lies, and now here you are… the man who would be king, king of nothing."

The words came in a sinuous croon, a whisper spoken in the recesses of his mind as much as aloud.

"They betrayed you, but we can make them pay. All of them. The whole of Yggdrasil will kneel
before you and tremble at your name. You were meant for more than this. I can make you great again. I can make you a king."

Snow, ash, summer rain.

The wave of brown hair on an island breeze.

Fingertips on the inside of a wrist.

Such a quiet thing, to fall.

"It will not be enough." Flat on his back, Loki tracked the slow progression of the stars and absently fingered the raw holes around his lips where the stitches had been. "If it is Asgard you seek, the Tesseract will not be enough to win her."

Thanos stopped his approach several feet away. "I have no desire to win the Realm Eternal. She is a phoenix. She must be destroyed before she can be reborn again."

"Simpler…" Loki sniffed. "But still not enough."

"The Tesseract is one of only two missing pieces. When all six are reunited, no force in the realms will be able to withstand their might."

Comprehension hit hard and all at once. Loki closed his eyes. "The Infinity Gauntlet. You have the match to the one in Asgard's vault." It was embarrassing, really, how long he'd taken to grasp the entire picture.

"And four of the stones." Even without seeing his expression, the arrogance was unmistakable. "But until the set is complete, it remains nothing more than an impressive collection."

"Malekith nearly overthrew Bor using only the Aether."

"How close he came to succeeding doesn't interest me. He failed. That is the only thing that matters." Thanos drew closer. "You see, now, why we need the Tesseract."

Four Infinity Stones were enough to wreak havoc throughout the realms. Five would make the wielder practically unstoppable. But Thanos was right to be cautious because, without all six of the stones in place, the Gauntlet could not be trusted to ensure a victory.

"That still leaves one stone unaccounted for."

"A problem that will be dealt with in time." If not for the stiffness around his mouth, Loki might have smirked. Thanos didn't know. "But first…"

Several things happened at once. Something thumped against the ground and slid to a stop near his hand, an insufferable weight he hadn't even fully registered was lifted from his chest, seiðr flooded
his being, the pain he'd been fighting all but disappeared, a fog cleared from his head, and the expanse of the realms opened before him.

He could feel the particles that comprised everything around him, both living and inert. He could sense the dark energy that surrounded the Realm Between Realms and made up the lining of the Void. He could hear the gentle creak of Yggdrasil's seams, the hum where space was open to those who could find it. It was like coming back to himself.

Loki opened his eyes. Already, the mottled concoction of burns and incisions that covered his chest was healing. He watched in silence as muscle knitted together, tissue regrew, and new skin edged across the burns. Not until he was more whole than broken did his gaze shift to the scepter that lay at his fingertips.

"There are no heroes in Ragnarök. There is only you and the destruction that follows in your wake. Your return will signal the beginning of the end." In his peripheral vision, Thanos raised a fist. "With our combined might, all will perish and you will take your rightful place."

Loki sat up and extended a hand over the scepter. "All will perish…"

"All who would stand against us." Muted light from a distant, dying sun caught on the gold-plated staff, the expertly-wrought steel, the blue stone cradled within. "Glory and gore go hand in hand."

"And you?" From his spot on the ground, he cast Thanos a sideways glance. "Where is your place after the realms have fallen?"

"Aside from an end to those who defy us, I seek only dominion of Niflheim."

Loki arched a brow. "You wish to rule over a dead land?"

"Death is a demanding mistress…" The embellishments of Thanos' helm blocked the dim light and threw his face into shadow. His eyes almost seemed to glow in the resulting gloom. "And Hel has stolen too many that should have been hers."

It was a lie. Or rather, a partial lie. Those were the ideal kind. The closer one stayed to the truth, the more convincing the lie, the harder to spot. But Loki was well-versed enough in the art to know that trick well. The nine realms had not dubbed him Lie-Smith without reason. He was a master.

"Join me. Take up the scepter and retrieve the Tesseract so you can bring about Ragnarök. Do this, and I will make you a king."

Thanos stood before him, half again his height and adorned in burnished gold armor, an army of Chitauri warriors at his back. The Infinity Gauntlet gleamed on his left hand, illuminated in a rainbow of color by the three stones set into the spaces along his knuckles. The fourth pulsed beneath Loki's hand, and he felt fate stretch out before him.

Only one path remained.

His hand closed around the scepter.

This was what he was meant to do.
They made their way across the plaza with the rest of those leaving the Nationaltheatret, Jane's hand tucked into the crook of his arm as he guided her through the crowd. A bank of clouds had rolled in while they were inside and now hung heavy overhead, smoldered a dusty orange by Oslo's ever-present lights. Night, he'd come to realize, never truly existed in Midgard's cities.

"So…" With an eager grin, Jane bumped her shoulder against his. "What did you think?"

"Ridiculous."

She jerked to a stop. "What?" A couple was forced to hastily dodge or run into them, and she gave the pair an apologetic look over his shoulder before snapping back. "It's a classic. A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's most performed works."

"That doesn't make it any less absurd." He waited until another group of people had passed. "It only proves the majority of Midgard is simple-minded and easily entertained."

"I happen to love that play."

"Hm."

Hand slipping free, Jane faced him fully and crossed her arms in mock affront. "Oh no, you don't. You don't get to hrm me. I am not simple-minded."

"But you are easily entertained?" Thunder rumbled through the air, and Loki turned his face to inspect the sky, hiding a smirk at the same time. She was notoriously easy to goad.

"Well, not everyone can be exposed to the wonders of Asgardian performances, can they?" A playful shriek rung out across the plaza, followed closely by laughter, as two young boys darted by with an even younger girl close on their heels. When they disappeared around a corner, Jane took hold of his arm once more and resumed walking. "I honestly thought you might like it. There was magic."

He sighed. "Fairies and love potions are not magic, Jane. You know that."

"Ugh… you can be such a bore sometimes."

There was no bite to her words. The flicker of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth ruined any seriousness the response might have had. Similarly, she knew better than to think his correction mean-spirited. They'd surpassed those issues long ago, although pinpointing the exact moment the dynamic changed was impossible.

It was a mystery, to be sure. For all their centuries spent together, dry humor and sarcasm were mannerisms Thor had never been able to grasp, and that disconnect had matured into a constant blockade between them. Not Jane, though. She'd sought the truth behind the lies, the man beneath the façade. She'd come closer when others had turned away. It was something he'd grown to value, their mutual understanding. No one saw him like she did.

"It was 1855 when I first saw that play." Loki blinked, returning to himself at the sound of her voice. "Emilie had been struggling in her courtship with John, so I'd taken her to see it. I thought she could use a good laugh. Something lighthearted." Almost imperceptibly, her fingers twitched on his forearm. "I remember one of Bottom's speeches made her laugh so hard she snorted."

In a preamble to the incoming storm, the wind began to pick up around them. It tousled Jane's hair, eased the curls from their careful arrangement at her nape. Loki watched her tuck an errant strand behind her ear from the corner of his eye.
"I suppose you're right." Oblivious to his attention, she huffed a laugh. "It is a bit silly."

The confession, however reluctantly given, was as appeasing as her wistful tone, and Loki's head canted in his own form of compromise. "Regardless, your friend must have felt better."

Jane nodded. "She did. And silly or not, there was a grain of truth to it. A few of the lines struck home, made her feel better about her situation."

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

The quote rolled off his tongue without thinking. With his free hand, he unbuttoned the formal suit jacket Jane had insisted he wear and shrugged out of it. While not strong, the wind had taken on an edge that was too chilly for Jane's sleeveless dress. Goosebumps peppered her arms. However, when he moved to offer her the jacket, he was met with a smug expression.

"You were listening." Jane prodded his arm. "Are you sure you didn't like the play? I bet you secretly did and all that talk about it being ridiculous was a lie. You probably remember all the lines."

Truthfully, the play had not been so terrible. Parts, yes, but not the entire piece as a whole. He couldn't exactly admit to that, though. It was far more entertaining to tease.

"Indeed. Lord, what fools these mortals be…" Pointedly ignoring her simper, Loki draped the jacket over her shoulders before letting his hands ghost down her arms to her wrists. "I related to that one in particular."

"Of course you would."

At his silent urging, Jane spun her hands until her fingertips curled lightly against the inside of his wrists. He studied the lines crisscrossing her palms, the collage of half-faded scars and callouses. Her hands were a painting that depicted a thousand lifetimes' worth of hardship. And yet, they could be so soft. Jotting down various research notes. Picking springtime flowers while the morning sun haloed in her hair. Touching him.

The majority of the play's attendees had made their way home for the night. Only a few had remained scattered about, but even they began to leave when the plaza was momentarily lit by a streak of lightning. As if on cue, a raindrop splashed on the back of his hand. Another soaking into his shirtsleeve had them looking up.

"Things base and vile, holding no quantity, love can transpose to form and dignity. Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind." Loki's gaze drifted back to Jane, but she remained where she was, face tilted to the sky, eyes closed, lips parted in a gentle smile as the wind circled them and the clouds opened up to a steady shower. "That was always my favorite." Raindrops beaded on her lashes when she finally opened her eyes. "Shakespeare really did have a way with words."

"And implications, so it would seem."

She looked to him. "What do you mean?"

Confusion wrinkled her brow. Loki, on the other hand, experienced no such confusion. Instead, something both acutely fundamental and ironically tragic turned over in his chest.

He had watched Jane for most of her life. He'd seen her fight and struggle and claw her way through the ages like an animal, like she was taking on time itself. He'd watched her live, and he'd
watched her die. And now he watched the rain course down her face, watched the way she softened when he buried a hand in her hair, watched the currents around them change shape, watched her watch him watch her and he knew…

"He was right when he suggested love makes fools of all men."

Then, beneath that scorched sky, drenched by the summer rain, he kissed her and kissed her and kissed her as they burned through the twilight like the heart of some falling, fractured star.

Tunic, pants, boots, surcoat. Loki crafted the clothing from nothing and donned them piece by piece. Then he encouraged the material to transform from his customary garb to the trusted armor he'd worn since his first battle. Twin horns curved out and above his head, and below the rocky dais where he stood at Thanos' right hand, the Chitauri shouted.

It was all a lie.

He wouldn't be king. Not of Asgard or Midgard. Not even of the lost and abandoned Svartalfheim. The harbinger of Ragnarök could never be king. He knew that with absolute certainty. Neither would Thanos be satisfied with Niflheim. After consuming that realm, he would spread throughout the rest like a plague, claiming everything in his path.

Including Midgard.

And Jane.

Something twisted deep inside him. Their story had been written from the dawn of time. He had been destined to give her eternal life, and she had been destined to indirectly cast him into the Void, to the Realm Between Realms, to the one place where Ragnarök could begin. He was meant to be her beginning, and she was meant to be his end. There was no questioning that.

However, Ragnarök did not have to be her end.

The roots of the World's Tree would tremble, the Great Wolf would consume the stars and the earth would sink into the sea, Surtur would sweep across the lands in an inferno until the flames touched the heavens… but Ragnarök was to be the doom of the gods, not of all life. Jane would have lived. He would've done everything in his power to ensure her survival, the Norns be damned.

Thanos threatened all that, though. There'd been no lie in his eyes at that point. He truly believed in giving Death her due. So much hung in the balance. Were he to gain control of Midgard, the entire realm would become a sacrifice, an offering, and against the power of the completed Infinity Gauntlet, there was nothing Loki could do to stop him.

But the Infinity Gauntlet wasn't complete because Thanos didn't have all six of the Infinity Stones. Thanos would never have all six of the Infinity Stones. Whatever the Norns had in store for him, there was one thing Loki knew for sure: a margin for failure remained.

Thanos could be defeated.

The cloaked and hooded vizier continued to address the Chitauri, stoking their zeal into a frenzy worthy of battle. Loki obediently raised the scepter to a volley of roars when The Other motioned
back to the pair. Amidst the cheering, Thanos took the opportunity to lean in.

"You know what will happen if you cross me, Lie-Smith, and don't think I would not find you. There is no corner of Yggdrasil where you could escape. And I wouldn't be alone. Muspelheim does not tend to ally, but I feel Surtur might make an exception for you. There may be little of it, but I will tear down everything and everyone you care about in the most painful way possible."

Loki stood on the platform before Thanos and his army as resolve hardened to iron in his bones. Going against Thanos would be a fool's errand, and yet… *I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell, to die upon the hand I love so well.* Helena, perhaps, had not been so far off.

Ultimately, Jane would be his undoing.

But he wanted it that way.

Chapter End Notes

General facts for this chapter – Ginnungagap is a part of the Nordic creation myth and was a vast, primordial Void that existed prior to the formation of the realms as they currently exist in the story. It doesn’t have a definitive meaning. Gap is pretty self-explanatory; Ginnung is a little less certain, although Jan de Vries suggested “magically-charged”, which fits in nicely with the idea of the Void having at least a little magic built into it. So that’s what we’re going with.

Oskoreia, otherwise known as the Wild Hunt, was believed to be the time when Odin led his ghostly hunters through the skies of all nine realms. It lasted from October 31 to April 30, with the height of the hunt being December 21, traditionally the shortest day of the year. The beginning and ending dates were significant because the Norse believe them to be the two nights when the lights went out in all the realms, and the spirits and goblins were free to roam Earth.

Also, the Chitauri sewing Loki’s mouth shut is a nod to one of his punishments in the original mythology. Similarly, Thanos’ anger when Loki calls him mad is a reference to his moniker “Mad Titan” from the comics.

Lastly, A Midsummer Night’s Dream. That’s the play discussed in this chapter and referenced in the last. It’s been about five million years since I read it, though, so if I butchered anything, I apologize!

Come follow me on [tumblr](#)! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run… you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

An update! Four months sooner than usual, no less! Is that enough to earn forgiveness for my irregular updating schedule over the past year and a half? Yes? Please? Anyway, we’ll be edging into Thor: TDW territory with this chapter! Don’t expect it to follow canon completely, though. We’ll pull a few details from it before veering off in a new direction.

Another thank you to subjunctivemood for cleaning up my mess!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Look to your kingdoms – I am coming for them all.”

2013: Washington D.C., United States

“One bedroom, one and a half bath. Kitchen with a pantry, living room, dining room, and a study. Walk-in closet. It’s been recently renovated, but the owner tried to leave as many historic features as possible. All the woodwork is original to the building, as are the tin ceilings in the dining room and study. Really gives it that 1930s charm.”

Jane meandered from one room to the next, the realtor trailing behind her. Several of the updates had modernized the flat, but the original details prompted an unexpected wave of nostalgia. It felt like Chicago all over again. All it needed was the ground-in scent of cigarette smoke on the furniture and big band swing drifting through an open window to complete the picture.

“If you’re worried about lead paint, the ceiling tiles were restored about five years ago.”

Lingering in the open doorway that separated the dining room from the kitchen, Jane glanced at the ceiling. The tiles had been repainted a crisp, clean white, but the years had not been so long that she couldn’t imagine them as they’d once been. Probably copper – glossy and new at one point, then gracefully aged with patina – or even the dulled silver that had been popular at the time.

“Well, Ms. Foster?” The realtor flashed her most winning smile. “What do you think?”

Honestly, she should have been thinking about whether to ask the seller to replace the leaking window in the bedroom and repaint the damaged trim or leave it as is and lower the sales price. Or the realtor, even, and how her enthusiasm spoke to a slightly overpriced deal that culminated in a better commission.
But all she could think of was how New York still had months of cleaning ahead of it after the invasion, the world was reeling at what it believed to be a newfound discovery of beings beyond themselves, and somewhere out there, beyond the boundaries of Midgard and known only to a few, war was brewing… all as she considered purchasing a flat.

Such was the way of things, though.

Terrible events had happened while the threat of events even more terrible loomed on the horizon.

And yet, life went on.

Jane held out her arms, emotions reconciling into something a shade lighter than melancholy but not quite the peace of contentment, and pasted on her best approximation of a smile. “It’s perfect. I’ll take it.”

Silence had descended on the Triskelion, normally a hub of activity and noise. Security still monitored video feeds and maintained scheduled patrols while a handful of agents followed an ongoing mission, but other than that, the building was quiet, hallways abandoned, lights dim. Everywhere, that was, except the rooftop research laboratory.

While working on Project Pegasus – and even after being booted out – all Jane’s efforts had been focused on unraveling the mystery of the Tesseract, how to harness its energy into forming an Einstein-Rosen bridge, how to determine the parameters to other realms. Now that the Tesseract was gone, that route had reached a standstill. Data from the machine Erik had built for the invasion remained, as did a breadth of information from his time under the scepter’s influence. Without the Tesseract, though, there was no way of testing her calculations.

Fortunately, deep space had been anything but dull in the almost eleven months since Thor and Loki had returned to Asgard.

“You know…” A beep sounded throughout the lab, and Jane abandoned the notes she’d been rifling through to peer through the telescope’s eyepiece into the depths of Ursa Major. “There’s something oddly comforting about going back to the basics.”

Erik grunted in what she assumed to be agreement from somewhere behind her. No doubt he was glad to be rid of the Tesseract. He hadn’t even gone near the lab that had held Loki’s scepter before it was transferred to another facility for further research. After what he’d been through, she could hardly blame him. He was probably happier than anyone to return to the norm.

Pulling away from the telescope, Jane shifted just enough to see Erik. He was hunched over a desk on the other side of the room, alternating between typing on the computer and scribbling madly in his notebook. It was a reassuring sight. Something typical, something she’d observed for years. But then he paused, squeezed his eyes shut, and bumped the heel of his hand to his temple while muttering, and Jane’s heart sunk.

Nothing had been the same since New York. Ever since his time under the scepter’s influence, Erik had been… different. Not unstable or dangerous, just prone to what they’d come to call moments. One minute he’d be doing a completely normal activity; the next, he’d be in another world, ramrod stiff and murmuring under his breath, lost in the residual effects of the scepter.
Each moment came randomly – there was no predicting when one would happen – although, thankfully, they never lasted long. Whenever he suffered one in public, she would wait protectively by his side and glare at anyone who dared look at them strangely until it passed. She’d learned early on to let it ride its course. The one time she’d tried to interrupt, he’d grasped her shoulders strong enough to leave bruises, stared at her with glazed eyes, and rambled on about some five-thousand-year rotation for a few seconds before snapping out of it.

Without warning, Erik jerked back to himself, and Jane immediately returned to the telescope. Coming out of moments was hard. He always appeared shaken afterwards, and she liked to give him a bit of privacy to recover. Eventually, the sound of him typing resumed, an unspoken signal that all was well.

“We’re good to go on this end.” Jane spun around in the chair and snatched her preferred notebook from its perch on top of the nearby mass spectrometer. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Alright, coordinates coming your way.”

The monitor linked to the telescope dinged with the incoming information. Heartbeat quickening at the thought of finally getting some answers, Jane tapped a series of commands onto the screen and moved back to the eyepiece. There, she watched a familiar set of spiraling arms gradually come into focus.

“That’s…” Intrigued, she scrolled through the programming. “Erik, are you sure those are the right coordinates?”

“Well, I’m not going to stake my life on it, but they should be correct. They’re extracted straight from the original specs we used to bring you back.” Papers shuffled in the background. “Why, what did they come up with?”

Jane leaned back in the chair, chin resting on her curled knuckles, lips pursed. “M101.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, it’s just…” It just wasn’t what she was expecting. Flipping to one of the pages near the end of the notebook, she jotted M101 next to the realm labeled Jötunheim. “Can you still get the statistics from when Thor left with the Tesseract, or has that been blocked?”

Erik clicked his way through the S.H.I.E.L.D. database. “Not blocked yet. Sending it over now.”

The telescope dinged again at the new coordinates and began to adjust, motors whirring as it moved to the new target. While it reconfigured, Jane looked through three different pages of drawings. There was a connection between each of them, and she was finally getting to the bottom of it, all using the hard facts of science. The proof was there. Not even Loki could scoff at her now.

It swelled like a sudden wave, the ache. Their parting was a wound that never fully healed, and as usual, the thought of Loki resonated painfully. Her actions – or lack thereof – in those final days was something she couldn’t forgive herself for. She’d relived his haunting look of betrayal countless times when the quiet of the night snuck up on her. But then, it was no less than she deserved.

Swiping the corner of her eye discreetly with her sleeve, Jane leaned into the telescope. “Messier 81.”

Unlike the multiple arms of M101 that had earned it the name Pinwheel Galaxy, the two primary arms of Messier 81 were more defined and spiraled ever tighter into its galactic nucleus. The galaxy burned brightly, alive with hot, short-lived blue stars that helped to illuminate the interstellar dust.
within its arms. It made it a popular target for amateur astronomers. Even with the telescope on a relatively mid-grade setting, the galaxy lit up the view.

Jane tapped the pen against her leg, then wrote *Messier 81* next to *Asgard* on the drawing. “What are the odds of us finding information from Loki’s arrival?”

“Zero. A lot of the data was destroyed in the explosion. Everything that had already been backed up to the main network was classified because of the attack.” The chair squeaked when Erik leaned back. “The most I can get you are newspaper articles that wrote it off as a gas explosion. If you don’t mind conspiracy theories, though, I can probably dig up some stories claiming it to be aliens.”

She snorted. “They’re not too far off. How about the portal during the invasion?”

“Same. Those files never even got to breathe fresh air. They were classified from the moment Loki stole the Tesseract.”

“Yeah, I figured those were a long shot.”

Turning to a page early in the notebook, she located the coordinates for Messier 82 and plugged it into the monitor. Soon, the edge-on starburst galaxy eased into view. She studied its central bar while Erik, having realized they’d reached a dead end for the time being, crossed the room to stand behind her. When she scooted her chair to the closest desk, Erik took her place at the telescope.

He peered through the eyepiece. “You think M82 is one also?”

“I have a hunch. It may not be as active as the others, but it’s given off enough readings over the years to be suspicious.” Intent on the sketch, Jane pointed blindly in his general direction. “And don’t you dare say it’s because of star formation. Those register differently, and you know it.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve learned not to argue with you.” The monitor beeped as the current figures were cleared. “Give me another set.”

Again, she turned to one of the beginning pages. “Try right ascension 9° 19’ 18.5” and declination 69° 12’ 12”.”

“NGC 2787? But it’s a lenticular…” The confusion in his voice was blatant. “There shouldn’t be much of anything going on there.”

“That’s exactly my point.” Borderline jittery with excitement, Jane spun around in the chair. “The scientific community may be more open to my findings now than they were a couple years ago, but most would still write it off as star formation. But lenticular galaxies don’t have the interstellar matter other galaxies do. There’s very little star formation. So why has NGC 2787 been giving off all these readings?”

Erik shot her a skeptical look. “We’ve had this same discussion about Messier 81.”

“Yes, but Messier 81 isn’t a lenticular, it’s a spiral. It has plenty of interstellar matter. All the components are there, it just doesn’t have the same rate of star formation. NGC 2787 is completely different.” One side of her sweater slipped from her shoulder, and she shrugged out of the rest. “Besides, if M101 and Messier 81 do link to Einstein-Rosen bridges, how could NGC 2787 not? It displays identical behavior.”

While Erik silently examined the galaxy’s characteristic spectral line, Jane returned to the three drawings.
The first was her original diagram of the galaxies with abnormal readings. Laid out in the months preceding Thor’s arrival, it depicted the Milky Way at the bottom of the page with a handful of other galaxies dotted above it based on their distance away in light years. It also bore Thor’s rough outline of the World’s Tree given that night in Puente Antiguo.

The second was a traditional layout of Yggdrasil as described in the myths. There, Hel was at the bottom. Above it were Jötunheim, Svartalfheim, and Niflheim, followed by Midgard at the center of the page. Muspelheim, Alfheim, and Vanaheim came next, with Asgard at the very top. The nine realms were surrounded by another identical outline of the World’s Tree, this one drawn by her.

The third was another one of Yggdrasil. On this one, however, she’d begun matching up galaxies to the realms. Milky Way and Midgard, M101 and Jötunheim, Messier 81 and Asgard… this final illustration was meant to be the truth. There was no speculation anymore. Coordinates, gathered independently of her research and completely unbiased, proved the connection. They spoke for themselves.

Curiously enough, though, the third drawing matched neither of the previous two.

In the end, they’d both been wrong.

Space, it seemed, remained full of secrets.

“So…” Lost in thought, she hadn’t even heard Erik approach. He stood beside her now, inspecting the third drawing over her shoulder. “These galaxies you’ve been tracking are supposed to link up with each of the nine realms.”

Jane nodded. “That’s the idea.”

When she first began documenting the galaxies, she’d still been suffering from amnesia. There’d been no way for her to make the connection between her research and the reality that was other realms. She had the opportunity after Jötunheim, but she’d been too preoccupied back then, too busy trying to refigure the parameters, too desperate to find Loki to see the bigger picture.

But those distractions were gone now. Thor and Loki were back in Asgard, as was the Tesseract. The Einstein-Rosen bridge from the invasion was closed, and the scepter was safely under S.H.I.E.L.D. control. Issues remained, of course – the fire giants, the titan from the Realm Between Realms, the mysterious Convergence, Ragnarök – but they were no longer her sole focus. She’d finally learned to center on what she could explain rather than chasing after things beyond her understanding.

And so it had come to this.

NGC 3079, the Milky Way, NGC 3310, I Zwicky 18, NGC 4013, Messiers 81 and 82, NGC 2787, M101… nine galaxies that had routinely giving off abnormal and unexplainable readings, nine galaxies she’d been researching for the better part of a decade, nine galaxies for nine realms.

“You really think that’s how it works?” Erik picked up a copy of the list of galaxies yet to be matched. “That it’s as simple as that?”

“Yeah, I do. Sometimes the right answer really is the most straightforward one.” At the wrinkle forming between his brows, she nudged him with a lighthearted smile. “Why does it have to be complicated?”

“Because you weren’t in M101 when we found you. The coordinates may point to it, but the readings were all wrong.” He shook his head. “I was monitoring the output, Jane. Every device in
the room was going haywire. The gravitational waves were so distorted they were off the charts. That wouldn’t have happened if it was a—"

“That’s because I wasn’t in M101, I was in Jötunheim.” The paper fluttered back to the desk, and she pushed it aside, pointing to the diagram. “They’re connected, but they’re not one and the same.”

In another lifetime, Jane had been a governess. She’d fed children, clothed them, put them to bed. She’d taught them everything from math to history to writing. To watch someone learn was a rewarding thing. She distinctly remembered the instant one of her charges went from reciting the bedtime story to actually reading it. Seeing awareness fall over Erik felt a lot like that.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth. “You’re suggesting a Lorentzian wormhole.”

“People always wanted to prove life existed on other planets. Turns out they were right… they just weren’t looking in the right universe.” Jane looked down at the drawing, ran a finger from point to point across the page. “Open an Einstein-Rosen bridge using the coordinates for any of these galaxies, and you’ll end up somewhere else. Not a planet in M101 or NGC 4013, but another realm entirely. Ursa Major is the gateway, and these galaxies are the keys. I’m sure of it.”

The clock chimed six o’clock in the background, and they both glanced at the large windows in the observatory area automatically. Outside, the sky had begun to temper with the promise of dawn, the endless swath of obsidian giving way to dusty rose on the horizon. It signaled the end of a workday for the pair. Another night of research was over.

“What do you say we call it a night?” With a yawn, Erik stretched, fists pressed into the small of his back. “I need some time to make sense of this. We can pick it back up on Monday.”

Except Jane couldn’t wait until Monday.

The weekend extended before her, two days of glorious rest after night upon night of observations. But despite the fatigue, her thoughts refused to slow. The discoveries spun round and round like a carousel, and any time it paused long enough for another thought to emerge, it was the mystery of how to connect the remaining realms and galaxies without any data that came to mind.

And so it was after only a quick bite to eat, a shower, and a few hours of restless sleep that she found herself back at the Triskelion. There were more people wandering the building than the night before, but still significantly less than a normal workday. Apparently, even S.H.I.E.L.D. agents took a break once in a while.

Detouring by her official yet rarely used office on the way to the lab, Jane picked up a stack of files and stuffed them into her bag. They were her oldest notes, most of them dating back to her first years at Culver. There were a handful of others, too, pages recreating observations she’d made back in the 60’s.

The odds of finding anything useful were slim to none. Both periods of research had been limited by either a lack of advanced technology or a lack of knowledge compliments of her amnesia. There was always the chance, though. No progress had ever been made without taking chances.

Turning off the light and locking the door, Jane made her way back to the elevator. It was while she was waiting for it to arrive, absentmindedly flipping through one of the notebooks, that she heard it.
She fell still, page held mid-turn, eyes trained on a faint fluorescent glow she hadn’t noticed when passing through earlier.

Soft but unmistakable, coming down the nearest hallway… it was music.

Hers wasn’t the only office on the floor, by any means. The Triskelion was a maze of hallways and offices, cubicles and meeting rooms. But the majority of the twelfth floor belonged to scientists of varying specializations that rarely worked weekends. So who would be hanging around on a Saturday afternoon, playing music no less?

Intrigued, Jane peeked around the corner. Light and music spilled from an office halfway down the hall, along with a couple voices. Forgetting the elevator, she returned the notebook to her bag and made her way towards the room. The music became clearer along the way. By the time she stood outside the doorway, it was plainly recognizable as jazz swing. One of the voices was recognizable too, and a grin began to tug at her mouth before she’d even rounded the corner.

“Artie Shaw. Always a good choice.”

The two men standing in the office turned as one. Surprise flitted across the face of the man closest to her. The other, however, took her sudden appearance completely in stride. With a weary sigh, he tossed what looked like a CD case onto the nearest desk and approached her.

“Not again…”

The younger man’s surprise gave way to a pleased expression. “You know Shaw?”

“Jane, we’ve gone over this before. My name isn’t Artie.” Placing his hands on her shoulders, he glanced back to his companion. “Poor girl spent two years as a captive in another realm. Hasn’t been the same since.” He faced her again, speaking slowly. “My name is Tony, remember? Let’s say it together… Tony Stark.”

“It was barely more than a month.” Jane removed his hands. “And Artie Shaw was a musician.”

“Well, obviously. This is one of his CDs.” A scoff came from the background, and Tony spun around. “Speaking of which, I didn’t know they made CDs anymore. Where did you even buy this?”

Jane caught the younger man’s eye. “Just ignore him. I always do.”

“So, that’s how it is. And after all I’ve done for you.”

Unable to contain it any longer, she chuckled, wry smirk widening into a full-blown smile. “It’s good to see you again, Tony.”

He offered a fleeting grin of his own, then chucked her under the chin before crossing back to one of the computers, gesturing vaguely over his shoulder as he went. “Space Cadet, Captain America. Captain America, Space Cadet.”

Jane looked at the young man for the first time – really looked at him – and promptly froze. It was like gazing into the past. She was still standing in the office, surrounded by an array of devices that screamed state-of-the-art, taking in the tall, handsome man wearing a fitted black shirt and jeans. But at the same time, she wasn’t. She was sitting on the steps of a makeshift stage beside a man in dull brown who was hiding from the rest of an army camp. A man who was still trying to figure out where he fit in the world. A man who had yet to make the leap to legendary superhero.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.” He stepped forward and held out his hand. “Steve Rogers.”
It was the exact same greeting he’d started with all those years ago. God, he even sounded the same. The sense of déjà vu was staggering and very nearly left her breathless. How had she not realized who he was sooner? Not that it would have changed anything. It wasn’t like she was going to run away to avoid meeting him face to face. Still, the danger was very real. For the first time in her life, she was at risk of being found out.

“Jane Foster. Nice to meet you.” Swallowing thickly, she willed her voice to remain steady as she shook his hand. “I take it this is your music, then?”

Tony snorted. “It certainly isn’t mine.”

“Classic. You can’t go wrong with Shaw, although I’ve always been partial to Benny Goodman myself.” The brassy strains of a trumpet were suddenly interrupted by synthesized pop, and Jane pulled the phone from her pocket. Darcy Lewis. Rejecting the call, she put the phone on vibrate. She’d call her back later. “So what are you two doing here?”

“That’s classified. Need to know basis only.”

Steve shook his head slightly. “Fury wanted a fresh set of eyes on some intelligence he’s been getting. Tony’s been a consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D. since the ordeal in Florida.”

“So is that.” Groaning, Tony spun around in the chair. “Do you even know the meaning of classified?”

“I didn’t know you were consulting, Tony.” Jane crossed her arms and turned her attention to the older man, but not before noticing the strange expression Steve had suddenly adopted. “You told me you were retired.”

“They’re called secrets for a reason. And for the record, just because I rescued you from an alien prison, got you into the best lab in the country, and backed your research after the invasion doesn’t mean I like you.”

“You also funded the grant that got me to New Mexico.”

“Pity funding.”

“Is that what they call it?”

“I do it all the time.”

“Of course.”

She knew better than to take offense. If there was one thing she’d learned from working with Tony Stark off and on over the past year, it was that he was reluctant to show affection – genuinely honest affection – to anyone but Pepper. Others close to him received a condescending sort of sarcasm that was its own form of fondness. She also knew she’d get no explanation for his abandoned retirement if he didn’t want to give one, so content for the time being, Jane dropped the matter.

“Well, whatever it is, it must be important if Fury needs your help.” The phone in her pocket buzzed for the second time, but she ignored it, turning back to Steve. “I suppose you’re here to lend a hand in case—”

“Have we met?”

Jane’s heart skipped a beat. “What?”
“I’m sorry, it’s just you look…” Steve frowned, brow furrowed in concentration. “So familiar.”

Before she could formulate a reply, Tony unexpectedly came to her rescue. “That’s because she’s the romantic lead to our very own Thunder God. You probably saw her when Thor went back to Asgard. They were the ones making out on the sidelines.”

“Maybe.” The creases smoothed only to come back moments later in earnest. “No, that’s not it.”

“That’s what happens when you’re ninety-five. Memory’s the first thing to go.” A loud ping interrupted the music playing from a phone tossed onto one of the other desks, and Tony, still in the chair, rolled over to it. Seconds later, her own phone vibrated again. “Look like you’ll have to figure out how you know Jane later. Fury’s ready.”

Tony shut down the computer as Steve gathered the folders beside him. Meanwhile, Jane retreated to the hallway and pulled out her phone. One missed call, three emails, and one text message… all from Darcy. It wasn’t entirely unusual. Whenever Darcy thought she found something, she’d call immediately and repeatedly to verify, no matter how the time difference between London and D.C. fell at that moment.

But it wasn’t often that she sent emails as well.

“Jane…” She jumped, startled from her thoughts, and faced the two men leaving the office. “Always a pleasure.” Without the light from the office, the hallway was significantly darker. She could barely make out Tony motioning her ahead of them. “You take the first elevator.”

“No, you two go ahead. There’s something I need to look at.”

“Suit yourself.” Tony tucked his hands into his pockets. “I’d say I’d see you around, but I probably won’t. Do call, though, if you ever need me to break down the painstakingly obvious quantum electrodynamics on those bridges again.”

Jane issued an undignified huff – *that was only one time* – but he was already walking away. Weak traces of the light from the lobby outside the elevator caught in the blue of Steve’s eyes, highlighted the confusion he evidently still felt, but he merely nodded a silent farewell of his own before falling into step behind Tony. Not until they’d both rounded the corner did she select the first email from Darcy.

The subject was blank, as was the message, but the paperclip in the corner indicated two attachments. First was a picture of what had become the characteristic sign of an atmospheric disturbance: an aurora streaking its way across the night sky. Second was a screenshot of the same activity measured on one of her devices. Normally a gentle curve, the magnetic fields surrounding the planet had been distorted, bent drastically out of alignment by some other force.

Jane leaned back against the wall, fingers of her free hand pressed to her mouth. The next email’s attachment listed all the abnormalities registered by her old magnetometer over the past three months. The fact that they were increasing in frequency did not go unnoticed. Forgoing the third email, she opened the text message.

*You know all that scientific equipment you don’t look at anymore now that you have your fancy lab and machines? You might want to start looking at it again.*
“Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“Positive.” Jane adjusted the carryon bag slung over her shoulder and watched the dwindling line outside the terminal. “You know how finicky those devices can be. They might just need to be recalibrated.”

Avoiding Erik’s gaze did nothing to lessen his sarcasm. “All of them? Did Darcy cause the auroras too?”

“That’s why I’m going. When I sent her to London to check out that blip, I never thought she’d actually find something. I know she’s not always the most reliable, but I can’t take the chance that she’s wrong.” Not anymore. Not when there was so much at stake. “I haven’t seen readings like those since… since…”

“Since New Mexico.”

Jane inhaled slowly, then let the breath out in a whoosh. Events were occurring everywhere, had been for some time. Not all were the same, she knew that. Deep space anomalies varied from atmospheric ones, and localized disturbances were logged on a completely different scale. She was also deeply familiar with all the incidents, to the point they weren’t peculiar anymore. But something felt different now. Maybe that came with a general awareness of the realms. Or…

*He will make his move when the Convergence begins.*

Were the steady increases of activity and the revelations in her research pieces of some greater plan falling into place? Were they experiencing the beginnings of something that would soon become bigger than all of them? Was this what Loki had meant when he spoke of the Convergence?

“He’s going to come back, you know.” Blinking in surprise, she refocused on Erik who was offering his most reassuring half-smile. “The Asgardians will have rebuilt the Bi-Frost using the Tesseract. For all we know, this could be him again.”

It took an embarrassingly long time for her to realize he wasn’t talking about the same dark-haired, magic-wielding God Mischief currently occupying her thoughts. When she did, she opted not to comment, returning his smile the best she could and stepping forward into a hug instead.

“Keep your phone on you. If this turns out to be real, I’ll probably need your help.”

“I will.” Erik nodded. “Have a safe flight.”

Darcy weaved through the London traffic haphazardly. Cars honked every time she inadvertently veered into oncoming traffic, and it wasn’t long before Jane ducked her head, afraid to watch their progress. If they were going to die in an accident, she’d rather not see it coming. On a particularly bad turn, a thump came from the backseat, followed closely by a curse.

“Look at you… you’re wearing lady clothes.” Darcy leaned over the center console and sniffed. “You even showered, didn’t you? You smell good.”

Already, she was regretting the sweater dress she’d decided on that morning. “Is there a point to all this? Because there *really* needs to be a point to all this. I flew out here for a reason.”
“I’m just saying you clean up well when you’re not sleeping in the lab.” At her deadpan expression, Darcy sighed. “Fine… intern, get the magnetometer.”

A disembodied hand appeared between the seats. Jane took the proffered device, although the thank you that had been on the tip of her tongue wedged in her throat when Darcy swerved across two lanes of oncoming traffic that were too close for comfort to enter a narrow alleyway that would make anyone claustrophobic. Averting her eyes once again, she powered on the magnetometer and was immediately met with a steady string of beeps, the dial swinging from one extreme to the other.

Jane frowned. “It’s malfunctioning.”

“That’s what I said.” Darcy looked over when she knocked the reader against the dash. “That’s what I did! But I thought you’d do something a little more scientific.” Somehow managing not to hit anything, Darcy retrieved another device from the back floorboard. “Here, look at this one.”

Lines swirled across the screen. While it registered a variety of factors, the most interesting was the surplus of abnormal particle data that typically signaled the beginning of an atmospheric anomaly. Confused, Jane looked at the sky. Cloudy, dreary, cold… it was perfectly normal conditions for London. Nothing like the auroras she was accustomed to or even the cyclones that had been generated in Puente Antiguo. If this really was an event, it was nonconforming.

“It kinda looks like the readings Erik was rambling about in the beginning, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah…” Mind reeling, Jane powered off the magnetometer but continued to watch the activity on the other shift and change as they progressed through the backstreets. “Yeah, it does.”

They emerged from the alley into a series of vacant parking lots. Buildings that had long since passed their prime surrounded the area, windows knocked out, a combination of graffiti and weeds scrawling up their walls. They parked at the edge of the third lot in front of what had once been an office building. To the right were some old shipping containers that had been placed on end and strategically stacked. There was no one in sight, only a handful of abandoned vehicles.

“Come on, this is exciting. Look, the intern is excited.” Darcy all but jumped out of the car. “Do you want the phase meter?”

“No.”

Responding was pointless, though, because Darcy just ignored her and tossed the keys to Ian. “Bring the phase meter. The toaster-looking thing.” Then she took off towards a distant warehouse, waving Jane along. “Come on, the intern says it’s this way.”

An eerie sort of silence had settled over the area as they entered the warehouse. There were noises, of course – the occasional raindrop falling from the rooftops, startled birds disappearing into the rafters, the scuff of a shoe on concrete, wind whining through the windows – but they were muffled, like they’d happened inside a sealed container instead of an empty, spacious warehouse.

The lack of a proper echo bothered her, though she couldn’t explain exactly why. Intuition, maybe… that gut instinct that had served her well for so many centuries. Then again, neither Darcy nor Ian seemed affected by it, so maybe it was all in her head. Still, not even the surprise of coming across three teenagers hiding out in the warehouse could shake the weight in her chest.

Not until they showed her the lorry, at least.

A forgotten concrete truck from Norman Emerson & Sons, it obviously hadn’t been used in years. Rust dotted the exterior, and there were several dents around the frame. She doubted it would even
start if they had the keys. And yet, it floated several inches off the ground. *Floated.* One of the boys grabbed the front bumper and lifted, and the truck rose even further into the air as easily as if it were a balloon, spinning in a slow circle.

It was impossible.

But there was more.

In an exposed stairwell, she watched a glass bottle dropped from mid-level vanish before hitting the floor only to reemerge above. She watched it fall over and over again, stuck in a continuous loop created by what had to be two connected disturbances in space-time, until one of the boys caught it. Then she watched a can disappear below without reappearing at all.

Across the stairway, the teenage girl shrugged. “Sometimes they come back, sometimes they don’t.”

Without warning, the device in Ian’s hands blinked to life. Dots scattered around the perimeter of a replica of Earth indicated activity on an atmospheric scale while the compass feature in the lower corner of the screen showed three spikes of activity occurring locally. Darcy looked around the stairwell, eager for something to throw like everyone else, but Jane nudged her aside to pull the phase meter from its holder.

The compass rotated to accommodate the change in direction. A flare of yellow atop it identified the event in the stairwell, but two lines pointed to disturbances northeast of where they stood. One was small, roughly twenty-eight meters away. If she had to guess, it was probably the floating lorry. But the other was far more significant and only thirty-five meters away. Whatever was going on, it was somewhere nearby, somewhere in that very warehouse.

Leaving Darcy, Ian, and the teenagers behind with strict orders not to touch anything, Jane jogged up the stairs to an outdoor space. The sun had set since they’d arrived at the warehouse, but there was still enough light left to explore. Through a hole in the roof, she watched the group continue to toss things into the stairwell, and couldn’t help but smile every time the phase meter recognized the disappearance and reappearance of an object. It was exactly the type of data every scientist hoped to document.

Following the compass on the phase meter, she tried to find the other event. The entrance to a loading area was a dead end, as was one that led to a maintenance room. Another led to a hallway that skirted the entire event, eventually bringing her back to where she started. It was in a leaf-littered stretch of old offices that she finally found success.

The phase meter’s beeping increased as the distance on the compass decreased. She was getting closer. There were two corridors to choose from – one in front, one to the right – but just as she decided to call Erik and give him a rundown of what they’d found while she continued searching, she heard a soft voice.

She wrote it off as Darcy, at first. Bored with the stairwell and seeking a new form of amusement elsewhere, she would’ve roamed around until coming across Jane. But when she checked outside, no one was there. Not even around the sides of the office building. It was only her, the beeping phase meter, and the echo of a whisper.

Returning to the entryway, she poked her head inside and eyed both of the dingy corridors. They were completely unremarkable, and yet, within only a handful of seconds, she heard it again. More intriguing, still, was the fact that she recognized it. She’d experienced those whispers before – the hazy and indistinct murmur, the innate lure that called to her – on both the first and last times she’d seen the Tesseract.
The voice came to her like a vapor. It slunk through the air, curled around her body, drew her in, and in its velvety depths she saw it. Wisdom, power, knowledge beyond measure… she could have it all. The means to create and stabilize an Einstein-Rosen bridge at will, understanding of the realms, answers to all the questions she’d ever had, did have, or would have, and you want it don’t you, you want it, it’s there, all you have to do is claim it, take it, use it, use me…

A blaring ringtone suddenly pierced the stillness, and Jane’s eyes shot open as she stumbled back with a gasp. When had she even closed them? The phone clattered to the ground between her and the entrance to the building. Swallowing thickly, she knelt down, retrieved the phone, and swiped her thumb across the screen to accept the call.

“Hello?”

“Jane, it’s Erik. Just thought I’d check in, see if you’d found anything.”

“That’s…” She took a deep, steadying breath. The sound of Erik’s voice was simultaneously comforting and grounding. “That’s crazy. I was just getting ready to call you.”

“Have you had any luck?”

The wind had more of an edge to it as dusk bled into twilight, and Jane flipped up her collar against its bite. “A lot, actually. The atmospheric activity here is off the charts, way more extreme than the ones we saw in New Mexico. But it’s the local disturbances that are unprecedented.”

“How so?”

“I saw a floating concrete truck, Erik. We came to this old warehouse, and it was just there, hovering a few inches off the ground.” With one last look to the hallway, Jane dismissed what had happened and began to head towards the stairwell. “There were two connected rifts in space-time, too. We tested them ourselves.”

“That’s incredible!” His enthusiasm was palpable. “Were you able to capture everything?”

“The phase meter got it all. I’ll send the data when we get back to Darcy’s. Keep quiet about this, though. We have unimpeded access to a stable gravitational anomaly. Last thing I need is S.H.I.E.L.D. crawling all over Area 51-ing the place.”

The faint sound of laughter grew louder as she neared the place she’d left the group. Leaning over the hole in the roof, she spotted Darcy and Ian sitting on the stairs playing a card game with one of the teenagers. The other two must have gone home already. When they noticed her above them, they all waved.

“I just wish I’d brought some of your equipment. This event is right up your alley, Erik. If the magnetic fields are reacting this way, I can only imagine what gravity is doing.”

“Send me the coordinates to that warehouse when you get a chance. I’m going to the lab right now. It’s not as good as being there, but I might be able to zero in on something.” In the background, a car door slammed. “I wonder if this has anything to do with the Convergence.”

Jane froze.

And threw out one hand to the wall to steady herself.

And tried to remember how to breathe.
“What did you say?"

“The Convergence. You know, the alignment of the realms.” He paused, waited for her acknowledgement. When it didn’t come, he groaned. “I’ve told you about it a thousand times, Jane.”

“I am absolutely, one hundred percent sure that you have never mentioned any Convergence.”

Having been puzzled by the mystery of the Convergence and what it meant since Loki had first warned of it, she would have remembered Erik bringing it up. She would have known its significance. She would have been as shell-shocked then as she was now.

“Yes, I did. The Tesseract revealed the growing irregularities to me. That’s why I started looking into gravimetric anomalies after New York. You really don’t remember?”

The despondency that colored his tone made her heart twinge even as it skipped a beat at the prospect of revelation. “Remind me what it is again.”

“The universe rotates on a five-thousand-year cycle. Once a cycle, all the worlds align. Normally, they’re separate, but during the alignment, everything is connected. All nine realms… all nine realms are passing through each other, and gravity, light, and even matter is crashing from one world to the other.”

She vaguely recognized things he’d said during some of his moments, things she’d written off as aftereffects of the scepter. “So, the alignment is the Convergence?”

“Yes.”

“And the Tesseract showed you that?”

“More or less.”

Jane leaned against the wall at the top of the stairwell. “If what you’re saying is true, the walls between worlds will be almost nonexistent. Increases and decreases in gravity, spatial extrusions… the very fabric of reality could be torn apart.”

“Unless we use the gravimetric spikes I developed.” She vaguely recalled the objects that had always been scattered across his worktable. “If we place them at the focal point, they could stabilize the Convergence. Then all the other worlds would just pass us by.”

A few potential locations were tossed about, along with an apology for not having paid closer attention to the work incited by his moments, before they got off the phone with the agreement to discuss it more tomorrow. That would give Erik the opportunity to analyze the data and her enough time to get some much needed sleep. If her brain would quiet, that was. Finally having an explanation of what the Convergence was created a whole new batch of questions.

Jane rested her head against the wall and stared out at the place she the rift in space-time to be. If the Convergence was responsible for dissolution in the barriers between realms, it was entirely possible she was witnessing its beginning. And if that was the case, he – whoever the eponymous he was – would soon act.

Something terrible was about to happen across the realms. She was convinced of that now, without a doubt, and berated herself for not having gone to Erik with the issue of the Convergence earlier. Doing so would have required an interesting explanation of how she found out to begin with. Still, who knew what progress they might have made in their research by this point if she had, what evils
they might have prevented.

In the glow of nighttime London, she thought she briefly glimpsed the rift. It was nothing more than a slight wavering like water in the air, but when she blinked, it was gone. Right after, a cold wind swept through the stairwell, accompanying Darcy’s question of whether she was almost ready to leave. It skittered down her spine, chilled her with a bone-deep kind of cold. Unlike Loki, she’d never believed in fate, but this… she couldn’t deny that this felt an awful lot like fate bearing down on her. It felt like fate nipping at her heels.

Wispy clouds decorated an otherwise beautifully clear sky. The air was filled with the sound of crickets, chirping away in a melody of summer, and the gentle sigh of a breeze. All around, pine trees stood tall, stretched high into the sky, high enough to touch the clouds. In the middle of it all, Jane trailed her fingers through the tawny grass.

She knew this field.

She knew this dream.

Already behind her, the forest was ablaze. Trees toppled and smoke stained the sky a garish orange-grey while screaming, growling, and crying filled the air. When the grass transformed into thousands and thousands of skulls and shifted beneath her feet, she struggled to maintain her balance, sweat trickling between her shoulder blades at the sharp movement.

She wasn’t afraid. Not like she used to be. She knew that the events of the dream would transpire and pass, then she would wake in her bed, anxious but safe. It was the way they’d always been. But when she turned, expecting to see Loki, he wasn’t there. A giant wreathed in flame and shadow towered at one end of the field while a stocky figure wearing burnished armor and a golden helm stood at the other, and it was only then that she realized the dream didn’t feel like a dream at all.

*It’s time.*

The words reverberated around the field and seemed to feed the fire. It grew to immense proportions, so large that it obscured everything else, everything except the two figures. Facing the armored figure, she noticed eyes glowing from the darkness of the helm, eyes that fixed on her, eyes that *saw* her. One large hand adorned with a golden glove that sported several gems of varying colors raised and pointed at her, the haunting howl of a wolf arced above everything else, and…

Jane woke with a violent start.

And before the dream could even begin to fade, she was out of bed, throwing on her clothes from the day before, grabbing a flashlight and the phase meter from its docking station, and starting the car, the barest hint of dawn chasing behind her as she sped towards the warehouse.

Night had turned the building into a place of shadows. They gathered in the corners, bled down the walls from the rafters above. Jane didn’t care, though. The occasional stream of moonlight found its
way through the broken windows, pitching her route in varying beams of silver and black. When it didn’t, her flashlight lit the way.

She passed the floating lorry and climbed the stairwell with a single-minded purpose, spurred on by an urgency she couldn’t describe, while the phase meter led her in the right direction. The beeps picked up as she exited the stairwell and crossed the outdoor space. In the distance loomed the entrance to the office building.

Her pace increased with that of the phase meter’s beeping until she was jogging the last stretch of the rooftop. Only when the concrete vanished into darkness did she stop. She scanned the area, heart keeping time with the device in the sudden absence of her footsteps. Maybe she shouldn’t have come alone. But then, the phase meter signaled a particularly strong surge of activity, and she stepped forward without thinking.

Leaves crunched beneath her feet as she slowly entered the first hallway. The beeps lengthened into a steady whir, and she glanced down at the phase meter. A plethora of dots surrounded the planet, and yellow spikes spun in a circle around the compass. It was the largest anomaly she’d seen to date, but just as she was about to adjust the screen to one with a more detailed view, the display crackled with lines of static, blinked, then went out.

“No, no, no…” Jane paused and shook the device. “Don’t do this to me now.”

When it remained stubbornly dark, she fiddled with the controls on the side. When it still didn’t turn on, she hit it against her leg a few times. She was considering whether to hit it harder or remove the batteries to reset it completely, when she smelled it.

Smoke.

Jane’s head snapped up. Phase meter forgotten, her attention darted back and forth between the two corridors. The dream was still fresh in her mind. After several seconds, an unnaturally warm puff of air came from the right to ghost over her skin. She jerked away without thinking and eyed the shadowed doorway at the end of the hall.

That heavy quiet she’d noticed the evening before had returned in earnest. It took up residence in the empty space around her heart and squeezed, snuffing out her courage and leaving her cold in an instant. The back of her neck pricked, the hair on her arms stood on end. And the longer she stared into the yawning entry, the more she wondered if that was the outline of horns, the faint glow of magma-filled veins, the glint of fading light off sharp canines she was seeing in the darkness or if her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Swallowing thickly, she took a step back. Another hint of smoke brought on memories of a scalded giant that rose over a realm of lava and scorched earth; another wave of heat, memories of Moscow burning, of her close brush with death. But no matter how quickly her heart raced, she couldn’t run. It was a child’s fear. That feeling of something lurking right behind you, watching you walk away, chasing you down the hallway until you were forced to leap into bed and hide under the covers to make it go away. No, she couldn’t turn her back on whatever resided at the end of that hallway. She didn’t have the strength.

Not until a clawed hand emerged from the darkness and curled around the door frame.

Then Jane wondered if she’d ever run so fast in her life.

Walls and windows and doorways streamed by as she sprinted across the opening, down the stairs,
through the warehouse, and out the front door. The one time she looked back, she didn’t see anyone — or anything — following her, but when she finally scrambled to a stop beneath the shipping containers in the parking lot and felt warmth on her back, she ripped off her jacket to find three burn-lined rends in the material.

Panic tearing at her throat and lungs, she flung the jacket away. She hadn’t imagined it. She was alone in the lot, but she hadn’t been alone in that hallway. If her jacket wasn’t proof enough, the flames that now spilled from the office building she’d been in not even five minutes before were. That disturbance had been real, as was the fire giant that had crossed through it into her world.

She staggered back against one of the containers and watched the flames eat at the building. Every so often, she’d look at the warehouse door and the surrounding rooftops to make sure nothing had trailed her out. Seconds ticked by, and she slowly relaxed against the cool metal, adrenaline oozing from her system. However, she did give a strangled shout when her phone went off.

The name Erik Selvig flashed on the screen. He always seemed to choose the worst — or uncannily best, depending on the point of view — time to call. In the upper corner, the clock read 5:32 am, and she briefly wondered why he’d be calling her so early. Regardless, she answered the call. There was no time to wait, especially if the events were going to continue. She’d just have to wing it when it came to explaining what had happened without giving anything more away.

“Something’s happened with the anomalies, Erik. I’m going to book the next flight home. We need to talk to—”

“There’s been an attack on S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Jane’s thoughts stuttered to a stop. “What?”

“Someone broke into the North Carolina base a couple hours ago, destroyed most of the labs. Sixteen fatalities have been confirmed with at least a dozen more injured. There wasn’t a breach in security, though. No one has been able to explain how they got inside.”

And even though she knew what was at that base, knew what the most valuable item there was, she couldn’t help but ask. “What did they want?”

“Jane, they…” Erik’s exhale crackled in the speaker. “They took Loki’s scepter.”

“Hello, Jane.”

The phone slipped from her hand for the second time in as many days as she whirled around in surprise, but the screen shattered on impact this time. Hundreds of glass shards were scattered across the concrete, each one of them catching what remained of the sudden burst of light, casting them into a veritable rainbow. Jane took a hesitant step forward, towards the man who had suddenly appeared, the man she hadn’t seen in almost a year.

“Thor.”

Chapter End Notes

So this was a monster of a chapter. A bit of science, a bit of action, a bit of mythology, a bit of various plot threads starting to come together… and the fire giants make their
There’s a lot of stuff going on, some of it potentially confusing, so feel free to ask if you need more explanation.

Some quick-fire facts – a Lorentzian wormhole is one that can be traversed, allowing travel in both directions from one part of the universe to another. The ordeal in Florida Jane mentions while talking to Tony is meant to be the events of Iron Man 3. Go ahead and assume they’ve occasionally worked together over the past few months too. They totally would. Also, Steve Rogers! I know everyone was waiting for them to reunite. Expect another meeting in the future.

Again, we won’t be going through all the events of Thor: TDW. A few things will be tied into the story – how Erik’s interest in gravitational anomalies started because of what the Tesseract showed him; the effects of the Convergence; Jane witnessing the anomalies in the warehouse – but the backstory we’ve already built means it won’t follow the movie for long.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
The next few chapters will be relatively quiet, especially after the events of the last two. Bear with me if you start to get antsy. Things will eventually pick up. Think of this as the calm before the storm.

Thank you to subjunctivemood for being such a great beta! This chapter turned out so much better because of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Four

“The divine is not static and humane; the divine does not play nice. The divine is full of monsters, and they will eat you alive, everything you are.”

“You came back...”

“You doubted I would?” Thor closed the gap between them, dropped Mjölnir with a resounding thud, and framed her face with both hands before kissing her deeply. It didn’t last long, but the underlying intensity of it took her breath away. When he pulled back, it was only so far as to touch his forehead to hers. “How I’ve missed you, Jane.”

What should have been a natural response wedged in her throat, so she used the silence to take him in instead. He looked exactly the same. Then again, why wouldn’t he? Loki had barely changed over the course of a millennium. Why would Thor in less than a year? That was nothing more than a drop of water in the immeasurable lifespan of an Æsir, a fleeting breath. Although...

“You hair is longer.” She hesitantly touched his breastplate. “And your armor is new.”

“Not new, only improved.” It was a poor greeting, but he didn’t seem to mind. With a soft smile, he swept a thumb across her cheekbone. “You haven’t changed a bit. I see you’ve found new ways of making trouble in my absence.”

She followed his gaze to the building that was now engulfed in flames. “That? No, that wasn’t me. I mean, I was there when it happened, but it wasn’t my fault. Although it might not have gotten to that point if I wasn’t there to start with, but that still doesn’t... I’m not doing a very good job of explaining this, am I?”

“No, but I enjoy watching you try.”
Overwhelmed by a sudden rush of affection for the ever-sweet, ever-loyal, ever-reliable God of Thunder, Jane threw her arms around his neck. Too late, though, she realized the implications of her actions. Thor encircled her waist and lifted her off the ground, turning in a slow circle while she mentally kicked herself.

It was wrong of her to encourage him when she didn’t, wouldn’t, couldn’t feel the same way. Still, he held her close – her face pressed to his armor, his buried in her hair – until wailing sirens kicked up in the distance. When he finally set her down, the sound of glass crunching beneath her feet effectively scattered all other worries and brought the events of the past hour to the forefront of her thoughts.

“Oh, no!” Jane wormed free of the embrace and knelt to pick up the ruined phone. “He won’t have any way to get ahold of me. I bet he’s freaking out.” Then she remembered the reason for Erik’s call in the first place. “Thor…” She scrambled to her feet and grabbed his arm. “Thor, someone took Loki’s scepter! They stole it from one of the labs!”

All traces of contentment drained from his features, leaving him grim. “I know.”

“That’s why you’ve come, right? You’re going to get it back?”

“Were it not already gone from this realm, I would.”

It was a simple enough explanation, but something about his expression gave her pause. The way his lips thinned into a thin line, perhaps, or the slight dip of his brows. Jane leaned back. “You already knew it was gone.” The lack of response she received was answer enough. “Why are you here, then?”

Thor laid his hand over hers. “Heimdall informed me your life was in jeopardy.”

“Please don’t tell me you chose me over the scepter.” The thought made her physically sick. “I’ve seen what that thing can do. If you let it fall into the wrong hands because of your feelings—”

“Young wellbeing is paramount, Jane. My feelings for you have no bearing on that. I’ve long been taught that ruling involves making decisions for the greater good. I could not prevent the scepter from being taken, but I could get you to safety.” He pointed to the crumbling building. “That is only the beginning. A taste of what’s to come unless we find a way to stop it.”

Smoke billowed up into the early morning atmosphere, and Jane watched the flames lick at the stained sky. “You know what really happened up there?”

“Do you?”

She worried her lip, pointedly avoiding Thor’s gaze when he drew even with her. They were entering dangerous territory, skirting that invisible line of no return. Lying wasn’t an option. She’d spent too many hours berating herself for abandoning Loki in his time of need for that. The truth was long, though. And complicated. And would require more detail than they had time for at the moment, so she ultimately settled for only the bare bones of it.

“I know that something has to be going on in the realms. Anomalies are occurring all over the place, stronger and more frequent than ever before. Not just in deep space like when you first came here, either. They’re happening locally too. I also know that, while I was up there studying one of those disturbances, this… creature came out of the rift.” A shiver raced through her body. “Thor, what’s going on?”

“The sons of Muspel are on the move. The realms are no longer safe. Yggdrasil’s very existence is
threatened.” Flashing lights zigzagged through the farthest parking lot as the emergency vehicles approached the fire, and he pulled her out of view behind one of the shipping containers. “But this is a conversation better had elsewhere. Will you come with me?”

It was all so sudden. With the pieces of her phone strewn across the concrete, she had no way of letting anyone know where she’d be going or who she’d be going with. No one even knew she’d left the house this morning. When they eventually tracked her movements, saw the combined smoldering warehouse and circular imprint left by the Bi-Frost, and realized where she went… she cringed at the thought.

Darcy would be worried.

Erik would be furious.

But this was Asgard Thor was offering. Asgard and inter-realm travel and opportunity. She’d have the chance to experience the Bi-Frost again and see the Realm Eternal in all its grandeur for more than one chaotic evening. The chance to receive real, honest answers to questions she’d been chasing for so very long. The chance to aid in what was to come. The chance to make things right.

“Please, Jane. I need your help.”

Wait passively on Earth or take action in Asgard. It wasn’t even an issue, really. Her mind was made up long before Thor’s appeal, consequences be damned. Not even the mystery of why he needed her help, of all people’s, was enough to deter the anticipation worming its way into her limbs. She’d never been one for standing on the sidelines or letting others fight her battles. In the end, what else could she do?

And so, nodding breathlessly, Jane stepped into his waiting arms. They stared up into the hazy sky together, and she heard Thor call upon Asgard’s Gatekeeper, felt the familiar pressure take hold, watched London dissolve into a rainbow of light. Then they were flying. Magic hummed beneath her skin like a living thing as they rushed through the infinite expanse of space, lingering even after the Bi-Frost had deposited them safely and powered down.

The first thing she noticed was the reconstructed globe. She’d last seen it nearly two years ago. Jötnar had invaded the realm, Thor and Loki were locked in a duel, and she’d been galloping towards the mêlée when an explosion had ruptured the bridge. She’d watched it fall off the edge of the world, leaving travel between the realms virtually impossible. And yet, here it stood.

Jane rotated to take it all in. The only difference she could spot was the lack of stars. Instead, the sky outside was streaked with the red, orange, and yellow brushstrokes of sunset. Other than that, everything was exactly as she remembered, from the raised dais to the crystal floor to the engravings that adorned the interior. Even Heimdall stood atop the platform as he had before, hands on his sword. But when her eyes cut to the figure at his side…

“You!”

“Me, indeed.” A tall man sporting silver armor and white-blonde hair returned Jane’s inelegant gawk with a smirk and descended the dais. Ignoring Thor completely, he bent low in a bow, snagged her fingers, and pressed a chaste kiss to her knuckles. “It’s been far too long, my lady.”

Jane yanked her hand away. “Or not long enough.”

“Still angry after all this time…” Feigning disappointment, he shook his head. “And here I thought we’d moved past all that.”
“Lord Freyr, where are the Warriors Three?”

The deep timbre of Thor’s voice carried easily within the dome, and Jane had never been more welcome for an interruption. Having been on the receiving end of the Vanir god’s brazen interest once before, she resolved not to let it happen again. The less time spent with him, the better. However, while Thor’s voice commanded attention, it was not enough to compel respect. Not on its own, at least.

“They are not my warriors.” Freyr continued to focus fully on Jane. “Why should I have any knowledge of their whereabouts?”

If his tone wasn’t a direct snub, his inattentiveness was, and Thor frowned. “Because they were here when I left, and now you stand in their place.”

“I’m their sitter now?” Freyr arched one brow in her direction, lips quirking in a lazy smile. “Should I see to your human, as well?”

Jane saw it coming before either of them had even moved. With a barely-contained growl, Thor shoved his way between them, forcing the Vanir back a step. Twin pairs of blue eyes finally met in a heated clash, a silent battle of power between the crown prince of Asgard and the ruler of Alfheim. Tucked behind Thor’s shoulder, she nervously glanced to Heimdall who only stared calmly on.

“Might I remind you that you are a guest in the Realm Eternal. An honored guest, to be sure, but a guest nonetheless. It would serve you well not to insult Jane’s honor again.”

The tension in the room was tangible. Dense and bitter, she could well near taste it in the air. She had no great love for Freyr, but she also knew he was only trying to get a rise out of them. After spending who knew how many centuries together, Thor should have realized that as well. But then, he had the tendency to be rash. Loki had said as much long before she’d ever witnessed it for herself. Unwilling to let the situation deteriorate any further, Jane tugged gently on his cloak. “Thor.”

He visibly relaxed at her touch, although the keen edge to his voice remained. “I will ask you again, Freyr, where—?”

“They were summoned by the All-Father.” The three turned as one to Heimdall who pulled the sword free and sheathed it in one smooth motion. “It is my sworn duty to notify the king of crimes against the throne. You knew that when you left.”

“When he learned what you’d done, I was asked to retrieve the Warriors Three. It was only after that I decided to remain until your return.” Freyr’s charm was back in full swing when his gaze landed on Jane once more. “I’m sincerely glad I did.”

She wrinkled her nose. A sharp quip was on the tip of her tongue, but before she could respond, the Vanir disappeared behind the plated lines and gunmetal grey of Thor’s newly fashioned gladiator-esque armor. His hand was extended between them, palm up, waiting for hers. She blinked, then met his eyes. They crinkled at the corners in a reassuring smile.

“Come, Jane.”

She didn’t know where they were going or why. In all honesty, she didn’t even know what she was doing in Asgard. Thor had asked for her help. That was the extent of her knowledge. It wasn’t much to go on, but she’d always trusted Thor. Even when she didn’t know him for who he really was and his concepts of other realms had seemed crazy, there had always been this instinctive sort of trust. She accepted his hand and allowed him to lead her away with that same sort of blind faith.
“Best of luck, my lord.” Any genuineness the farewell might have had was erased by Freyr’s smug smirk, although he did dip his chin respectfully when she passed. “My lady.”

Dusk was nearly upon the realm by the time they exited the Bi-Frost. Dying rays of sunlight barely peeked over the western horizon while two moons began their ascent to the southeast, bringing with them large swaths of indigo and violet to slowly consume the sky. The first of what would become many stars winked in the distance.

Jane stifled a yawn as they walked down the bridge. The warm breeze and soothing shh of the Great Sea reminded her that she’d been awake since early that morning and suffered a fitful night’s sleep before that. Second time in Asgard or not, she’d be happy to fall into bed later.

“I apologize for Freyr’s behavior.” Thor stared unseeingly at some point in front of them. From the hard set of his jaw, he appeared embarrassed. “It is unbefitting for a man of his station to act in such a way.”

She shrugged it off. “That’s alright. He did pretty much the same thing last time I was here.” It was hardly the most offensive thing a man had ever said to her anyway.

Behind them, the Bi-Frost stood like a shining sphere against the darkness. Two figures were silhouetted in the entrance, and she absentmindedly wondered why Freyr would choose to stay behind. It had seemed like his sole purpose in being there was to taunt Thor, but maybe that was only part of the reason.

“Thor, how long has it been since the Bi-Frost was repaired?”

“Little more than three months. Reconstructing it was no easy feat, even with the power of the Tesseract. It might have gone faster if my…” He cleared his throat. “If others were able to help. Why do you ask?”

The correction didn’t go unnoticed, but Jane chose to overlook it. That didn’t prevent her heart from lurching painfully all the same. “I was just curious whether it had been used much or not.”

“Initially, it was. A group known as the Marauders had taken advantage of the Bi-Frost’s destruction to openly revolt against Asgard. Many of the Einherjar were sent to restore the balance of power, including the Warriors Three, Lady Sif, and myself.”

“I’m guessing you were successful if you were able to come get me.”

“We were.” Thor cast a brief smile and gestured her forward. “Though, I would have come to your aid regardless.”

Iridescent crystal gave way to flagstones as they passed through an archway that signaled the end of the Rainbow Bridge, and Jane eyed the elaborate houses of the castle town that rose around them.

“What are you using the Bi-Frost for now?”

“Peace treaties. The All-Father has forbidden its use for anything else. Several ambassadors have been sent to negotiate terms with the rulers of other realms.” He paused, reconsidering. “Well, some of the realms. There are those that will always resist.”

“Like Jötunheim.” Muspelheim, also, but she couldn’t exactly reveal her knowledge of how deep that animosity ran without delving further.

Beside her, Thor nodded. “Peace was hard-won after the last war. I imagine it to be near impossible this time around.” He rubbed at his beard idly. “Few things bring about ruin so easily as bad blood.”
Unfortunately, he was right. Enmity, discontent, resentment… those would always prove to be the greater stimuli. Progress was made in times of harmony, but it was war that instigated true evolution. Jötunheim was no different. She’d witnessed their brutality, the extent of what they were willing to do in the name of revenge.

Loki had said it would take centuries for the frost giants to unite behind another leader. Then again, he’d also once scoffed at the idea of them ever holding him captive. Underestimating the enemy wasn’t a mistake she planned to commit. Loki had stolen something from the sons of Muspel, and Surtur had held on to the vendetta for a thousand years. Why would the jötnar be any different?

They wouldn’t forgive.

Nor would they forget.

But while the future actions of a vengeful race weren’t something to ignore, it wasn’t something she could change. However, there was something she could. Or influence, at the very least.

She’d received the answer to her unspoken question in a roundabout way. If the Bi-Frost was only open to those realms willing to discuss peace and the jötnar were too hostile to even consider, that meant no one had travelled to Jötunheim. And if no one had travelled to Jötunheim, that meant Jane hadn’t fulfilled her end of the bargain.

Technically, she’d been released with the condition she find Loki and restore the Bi-Frost. And she’d done that, albeit indirectly… but Gerðr remained in Jötunheim, a prisoner among her own kin. Which, in turn, explained why Freyr was so keen to loiter at the Bi-Frost. If he couldn’t go to his wife or bring her back, he could at least be kept aware of her safety through Heimdall. In the end, until Gerðr was back in Asgard, the weight of their pact remained.

Broaching the subject would have to wait until later, though.

Jane blinked and stopped. The last time she’d made this journey, the Warriors Three and Sif had led her down the side roads to a more discreet entry. Now, a long flight of steps stretched before her, culminating in a grand entrance to the palace. Upon realizing she was no longer following, Thor stopped as well, looking back to her from several steps above.

“Where are we going?”

“To see my father.” In what seemed an almost nervous gesture, Thor bumped Mjölnir repeatedly against his leg. “It’s a bit sooner than I anticipated. I would’ve preferred you be able rest first. But with him having found out where I went…”

Jane’s focus darted from Thor to Mjölnir to the stairway and back again. “Use of the Bi-Frost is limited to emissaries only. You weren’t supposed to bring me here, were you?”

“I was not given permission, no.”

If not for the seriousness of the situation they were about to enter, she might have laughed at his sheepish expression. It was the most… human she’d ever seen him look. “Do you think he’ll be mad?”

“Perhaps. The All-Father has never held mortals in high regard.” Thor backtracked to where she stood and cupped her face in one hand. He didn’t appear nervous anymore, but she worried her lip all the same. “But whatever else he may be, he is, first and foremost, my father. And I am his son. Do not fear, Jane. He will hear me.”
“My words are mere noises to you that you would ignore them completely?”

The voice resonated loudly in the cavernous room. Just shy of a bellow, its steely edge sent a collective wince through the six individuals kneeling before the throne of Odin All-Father, King of Asgard and Protector of the Nine Realms. Even the Einherjar standing guard flinched. Jane glanced at Thor from the corner of her eye. So much for listening.

“Father, I—”

“I often wonder if you take pleasure in testing my patience. Going against your king’s command is treason. Do you understand that? The law is clear for everyone from the cook to the warrior. That you are a prince is of no consequence.”

“If you let me explain—”

“Is one son not enough? Am I to condemn the other as well? What’s more are those you involved. The greatest warriors the realms have ever seen… would you see them thrown into the dungeon for your own selfish deeds?”

“It was never my intention to—”

“The threat of the Convergence shadows all of Yggdrasil. Long-forgotten beings emerge from the deepest corners of the realms to invade your homeland, murder your family, and steal that which is ours. Meanwhile, you deliberately disobey me to search for a mortal harlot to share your bed.”

Jane stared resolutely at the patterns in the stone floor and bit the inside of her cheek. A combination of indignation, embarrassment, and outright anger had her face blooming in a brilliant flush. To her right, a muscle in Thor’s jaw twitched, and she half-hoped for a repeat performance of the Bi-Frost. But Odin was not Freyr.

“With all due respect, I must disagree.” Thor hesitated for a moment, continuing only when it became clear he wouldn’t be interrupted. “My actions were treason, yes, but my motivations were purely honorable. It was because of the Convergence that I brought her here. I did what I had to for the good of the realm.”

Something nagged at the back of Jane’s mind. Because of the Convergence. For the good of the realm. Please, Jane, I need your help. Clearly, Midgard wasn’t the only realm experiencing strange events… but what did all of this have to do with her?

Thor bowed his head. “Of course, I will accept whatever punishment you deem fit for my insubordination.”

While the Warriors Three and Sif quietly echoed the sentiment, Jane risked a peek through her lashes to the All-Father. He stood before the throne, staff in hand, outfitted in both armor and helmet that gleamed in the firelight. His mouth remained a stern line, but there was the barest hint of concession in the tilt of his head, the intrigue in his eye as he considered his son.

“You say it was because of the Convergence you fetched her.”

One almost-question. That was all it took to spur a shift in the conversation. Thor must have likewise
sensed his father’s interest because he stood without waiting for approval. “She was in danger.”

“She is mortal. When are they not?”

“She is also the only one to which he will speak.” Still kneeling on the floor, Jane snapped to attention and looked up at Thor in surprise. “He knows more than he lets on, you cannot deny it. If there’s even the slightest chance he will cooperate, we must act on it.”

Hope was a dangerous thing. It was fine in small doses. Encouraging, even. But gather too much… she’d endured the sting of disappointment and grieved as the world came crashing down around her on multiple occasions, which was why she’d scarcely let herself feel any measure of it over the past year when it came to Loki. Especially when it came to Loki.

Last time she’d seen him, he was being taken back to Asgard. Thor had implied a severe punishment for his crimes against Midgard, but she’d never learned what the sentence consisted of. For all she knew, Loki had been executed.

She’d treaded the sea of distress before, spent months preceding the Battle of New York agonizing over ways to find him, what she could have done differently in Jötunheim, if he was even still alive. Never again, she’d told herself. She couldn’t survive that twice. In the end, the easiest thing to do was nothing. She never imagined the worst, but she didn’t hold on to hope either. Ever since they’d left, she’d drifted in the in-between, but now…

Now hope twisted her stomach into a tangle of knots, sent her heart somersaulting crazily in her chest as she stood. “Who wants to speak with me?”

“Why her?” A quick glance revealed Odin to be staring at her shrewdly. “Who is she to him?”

“I wish I knew, but after giving his ultimatum, he’s refused to see me.”

The four warriors on the other side of Thor rose, and Fandral stepped forward. “Is spite not reason enough? It would not be unlike him.”

Jane brushed her fingers against the back of Thor’s hand in an attempt to draw his focus. “Unlike who?” When he still didn’t look, she shook his arm.

All her efforts were wasted, though. He merely reached up, caught her hand, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It could only be her importance to me, but…”

“But nothing. He does nothing without predicting everyone’s actions and weighing all the outcomes. Never has.” Odin’s tone was unmistakably colored by scorn, but there was a layer of something else beneath it too. Weariness, maybe. Or regret. “He learned that well from Frigga.”

The effect on the Asgardians was immediate. Some averted their eyes, others shifted uncomfortably. Even Thor lowered his head and took a deep, steadying breath before lifting it again, jaw squared. Jane frowned, wondering at the cause of their restlessness.

“Trust is delicate. He has done much to lose it and little to gain it back. I doubt we’ll ever be able to fully trust him again.” Thor’s hand settled in the small of her back. “But even if he were to prove false, Jane can still help.”

“No.”

Despite the ring of finality, Thor stiffened. “She is wise, Father, and knowledgeable of the realms.”
“More knowledgeable than we?”

“She is a scientist of great renown.”

“It was in the name of science that Midgardians turned their back on the truth long ago. They now believe themselves to be the center of all things, celebrating their achievements, crowing over their believed supremacy. If only they knew how lacking they truly are.”

Jane’s lip curled involuntarily. It wasn’t so much what he said that grated on her nerves but the way he said it, as if he had any room to talk, like they were so very different. No race was perfect, but she was really tired of dealing with gods and their insufferable superiority complexes.

“I’ve heard enough.” Odin waved a hand in her general direction. “Guards, take her back to Midgard.”

“You haven’t…” Thor’s words dissolved into a growl as the Einherjar began to approach, and he pushed her behind his back. “Our inability to track the Convergence has already allowed us to be taken by surprise. If mortals are so lacking, how is it Jane has developed machines that can?”

Odin slammed the butt end of the staff against the marble. “Silence! I will not watch my son beg over a mortal.”

“Neither will you see reason.” The Warriors Three and Sif hovered nearby, torn between joining their prince and obeying their king. They weren’t needed, though. When Thor adjusted his grip on Mjölnir, the two Einherjar faltered. “She is the only one who can help.”

“The Realm Eternal has been challenged since the dawn of creation, and she has yet to fall. Her strength will not fail this time either. We will deal with the Convergence as we always have.”

“But Jane belongs somewhere she—”

“She belongs in Midgard. She does not belong here in Asgard any more than a goat belongs at a banquet table.”

“You know what, that’s it.” Every face turned towards Jane as her voice cut through the argument. She shoved past Thor, eyes trained on Odin. “I don’t care who you are, I’m sick of being insulted and talked about like I’m not even here.” One of the Einherjar lowered his spearhead, and she slapped it away before fisting her hands defiantly at her sides. “You’re not better than me. You’re not better than anyone. The only reason you’re king is because you happened to be born into a royal family, and if this is how you treat others, then you deserve what’s coming.”

An awkward silence blanketed the room.

Realization of what she’d said filtered in a second too late. It didn’t matter, though. Given the chance, she’d do it again. She wasn’t a harlot, and she wasn’t helpless. She might not be a god with special abilities, but that didn’t mean she was a nobody with nothing to offer, some worthless mortal to be cast aside.

Thor’s hand slipped around her elbow, but she jerked it free and continued to glare up at Odin. Resilience held her ramrod straight. That, and an overwhelming sense of resentment. This was the man who once stripped Thor of his powers and banished him to Earth. The same man who had abandoned both her and Loki to their fates in Jötunheim, who saw their suffering and left them there anyway.

If the Realm Eternal had prospered and thrived under his rule, as she’d been led to believe, he must
have made a decent king.

But that didn’t make him a good father.

Adrenaline fueled her righteous anger – for Thor, for Loki, for herself – and quickened her pulse to a rapid staccato. Blood roared in her ears. And she was still grappling with the whirlwind of emotions scratching like static beneath her skin when the All-Father finally spoke.

“Leave us.”

The two Einherjar, Volstagg, Hogun, Fandral… one by one, they filed out of the throne room through one of the side entrances. Only Sif hesitated in the doorway, turned to fix Thor with a searching look before disappearing behind the carved mahogany. Once they were alone, she felt more than saw Thor move to stand next to her.

“Jane Foster…” Odin began to descend the steps to their level. “What do you know of the Convergence?”

Thor shifted so that their shoulders touched, a subtle reminder that he was on her side, and some of the fight drained from her muscles. “Every five thousand years, the realms align. It causes gravitational anomalies, huge shifts in magnetic fields, atmospheric disturbances. The thinning boundaries between the realms also lead to the random formation of traversable rifts in space-time.”

“From whom did you learn this?”

“A friend.” When Odin’s countenance darkened and darted to Thor, she quickly butted in. “It wasn’t Thor.”

Understanding smoothed his features. “Your comrade. The one who aided Loki.”

“Erik didn’t help. He was forced.” Jane swallowed down the instinctive need to defend Erik. It wouldn’t do any good, anyway. “But he did learn about the Convergence during that time. The Tesseract showed him.”

“He shared that knowledge with you?”

“Yes.”

“And that was all he discovered?”

“Yes.”

Odin tapped a finger against his staff. “How is it, then, you know what comes for us?”

“Because I was studying an anomaly right before Thor came, and I saw the thing that came out of it.” Obviously, it wasn’t the whole truth, but it would do for now. “If rifts are occurring in the realms and those creatures come through all of them, you should be worried. Especially since they have Loki’s scepter.” Jane glanced at Thor. “They were the ones who took it, right?”

However, Thor wouldn’t meet her eyes. “No.”

“No?”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t a son of Muspel.”

“But you said it wasn’t in the realm anymore. You said it was gone.” Fresh stirrings of dread plucked
at her heart. “Who else could’ve done that?”

“The same being who used the Convergence to steal into Asgard’s vault and take the Tesseract.”

“The Tesseract’s been taken also?” Jane looked back and forth between the two Asgardians in horror. “By who?” But she already knew who, knew it deep in the marrow of her bones, knew it even before the answer fell from Odin’s mouth.

“He who courts Death. A titan of the ancient world.”

The throne room seemed to tilt and spin dizzily. Loki’s warning rattled around in her brain, drowning out everything else. He will make his move when the Convergence begins. By then, it will be too late. She’d always assumed he meant Surtur. After all, the fire giant had been the one hunting them all these years. She never imagined the titan from the Realm Between Realms would come back into the fray.

Then again…

We are no longer the only pieces occupying the game board. Far bigger things than you or I are now at play. Loki had told her. For months, now, the answer had been right under her nose, she’d just been too blind to see it. And that wasn’t the only thing.

You will never understand what all I have sacrificed for you.

But she did. She did understand, and the realization was terrible and devastating and tragic. Loki had not only stolen something from Surtur, he’d slighted the titan too. Even if he hadn’t been the one to activate the failsafe, he’d made Erik incorporate it. He’d betrayed a titan, chosen his side knowing the destruction it would bring about, and if she was right, he’d done it all for her.

“Ready, Jane?”

She jerked back to herself to find both Odin and Thor staring at her, the latter’s arm extended, awaiting her own. “What?”

“I’m to escort you to your room.” When she didn’t respond, Thor’s brows arched, lips quirking in a half-smile as he patiently reminded her of a decision she hadn’t heard. “The All-Father has graciously allowed you to remain in Asgard.”

“I… what?”

Odin stared pensively at one of the nine tapestries that lined the throne room. One for each of the realms, they were fashioned in their likeness. Alfheim’s was a spiral of precious metals, Vanaheim was illustrated by a towering tree comprised of warm earth tones, Jötunheim’s was a blizzard of blue and white. It was the fiery one of Muspelheim that had captured Odin’s attention.

“The sons of Muspel have slumbered nearly two thousand years. This is the first I’ve heard of their movements. If they have chosen now to travel between the realms again, it is not by coincidence.”

Really, they hadn’t just awakened. They’d been on the move for probably half of that time, only no one except Loki and Jane knew that. Until now. That meant they weren’t hiding their actions anymore. That meant something fundamental had changed.

Odin frowned at the tapestry. “That they might be working in tandem with the titan is a troubling thought. Unfortunately, only one possesses that answer.” Then he turned to her. “Thor is right. We need more information. If this is our sole way of gaining it, so be it. You will remain here until we do
A series of wall sconces bathed the room in a soft glow the moment they opened the door, and Jane turned slowly as she entered, taking in every inch of the ridiculous extravagance with as much grace as she could muster.

Open and spacious, it was decorated almost entirely in shades of blue and silver. To her immediate left was a sitting area comprised of four chairs and a large Oriental rug. The woodwork was flawless, scrolling delicately to match both the elegance of the silk upholstery and the ornate desk farther down. Centered on the right wall opposite a fireplace was a massive four-poster bed. An armoire stood just past it, along with a privacy screen and dressing table complete with all the brushes, perfumes, and jewelry she could ever ask for.

But it was the way the finery opened up into a balcony that made her mouth fall open.

Jane crossed the room and pushed aside the sheer drapery. The marble flooring continued out to form the balustrade around a balcony nearly as large as the room itself. Beyond that, a sprawling garden dotted with statues and water features was highlighted by the mass of stars overhead. She ran her fingers over the small table, the two chairs, the chaise lounge, and inhaled deeply. The balcony smelled of jasmine. Jasmine and roses.

It was with a hint of reluctance that she eventually made her way back inside to where Thor was watching her with a gentle smile.

“These will be your chambers. There are several dressing gowns to choose from on the bed. More will be fashioned overnight.” He opened a door on the right wall. “You have your own washroom, too, if you’d like to freshen up.”

“This is…” Jane trailed off, gesturing vaguely.

“Not the best, admittedly.” Closing the bathroom door, he leaned against one of the bedposts. “But it was all that could be prepared on such short notice.”

She breathed a quiet laugh and moved to stand in front of Thor. “I was going to say too much.”

“You are a guest of Asgard, Jane.” He caught her chin between his forefinger and thumb, stroking absently. “My guest. It is no less than you deserve.”

“Your father probably wouldn’t agree, but thank you anyway. And for earlier, too. Thank you for sticking up for me.”

Surrounded by the marble and silks and gilded accents, Jane leaned her head against the bedpost and studied Thor. Kind, steadfast, protective… he was the type of man any woman would want. He was the type of man she should want. Falling in love with him would be all too easy, if she’d just allow herself to let go. There was only one problem.

He wasn’t Loki.

Exhaustion crept up on her out of nowhere, and she hid a yawn in the back of her hand. Meeting Odin had momentarily banished her fatigue, but now she was relaxed. With one eye, she peeked at
the bed in all its plush and luxurious glory. It looked so very inviting. When she yawned for the second time, Thor straightened.

“Rest.” He enveloped her in a hug, pressed a kiss to her forehead, stroked the length of her hair. “If you need anything, my chambers are just down the hall, third door on the right. I’ll come for you in the morning.”

In what little space existed between their bodies, she fiddled with the ends of her scarf. “When are you going to tell me why I’m here?”

The twirling drew his attention, and he freed the scarf to bring her knuckles to his lips. “Soon.”

“Thor…”

“Tomorrow, then.” His chuckle rumbled through her bones. “You have my word.”

There was one last kiss before he spun on his heel, a parting farewell – *sleep well, Jane* – reaching her as he closed the door. Then she was alone. Jane glanced around the room. It seemed even larger without Thor’s solid presence and unbelievably surreal. Who would’ve imagined the last-minute trip to London would culminate in this.

Fingering the dressing gowns, she considered whether to crawl into bed or take a bath first. But the longer she thought about it, the less either option appealed to her. Instead, she returned to the balcony, a lightweight throw in hand, and collapsed onto the chaise lounge.

Twilight was in full swing with stars sparkling brightly, pinpricks hung in the inky depths. Even to someone who had made a career out of studying them and centuries more in general admiration, it was breathtaking. More stunning than the room or the palace or the whole of the Realm Eternal. And so it was with a contented sigh that Jane tucked one arm behind her head and fell asleep to the slow dance of the moons across the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing to really mention or explain this time around. We’ll save all that for the next chapter. But I did want to let everyone know the next update probably won’t be until mid-November. I was late getting the chapter finished thanks to an addictive show (please watch Stranger Things if you haven’t already) and a wonderful couple of books (please read the first two books in the Shades of Magic series if you haven’t already and then sadly wait for the third with me). Now, I’m getting ready for an extended trip to Montana to visit family and play in the snow. We’ll pick back up when I get back!

Come follow me on **tumblr**! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run… you know you want to.
Hello, hello! I survived Montana and had a great vacation. Thanks so much to all of you for patiently waiting. Hopefully this chapter is worth the wait.

Massive thanks to subjunctivemood! Your skills never cease to amaze me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five

“A girl made of splinters isn’t built for love, but they tried anyway. They tried. And turns out, I can. I can love hard as shrapnel… so hard I melt skin.”

2013: Asgard

Trk-trk-trk

The hazy veil of sleep shifted like water, flowing from black to purple to rosy pink. A temperate breeze wound through the air, carrying the essence of sunlight and dew, further accented by jasmine stirred from the various trees and vines decorating the balcony. It smelled like morning.

Trk-trk-craw

Jane stretched languorously, rolled over on the chaise lounge, and pulled the blanket up under her chin. Whatever the time, it was too early to get up. The events of the past two days had left her exhausted, and despite her new status as a guest of Asgard, she wanted nothing more than to doze for a while longer.

Brr-trk-trk-trk

And to get rid of whatever was making that sound.

Groaning under her breath, she buried her face in the blanket. If she ignored the noise long enough, maybe whoever or whatever was making it would stop. That approach worked with Darcy. Well, mostly. A peaceful silence stretched out, but just when she thought the coast was clear, there came another trk-trk-trk. Frustrated, Jane opened her eyes, jerked in alarm, and promptly fell off the divan.

“What the…?”

It was a bird. With a distinctive comb and plume of tail feathers, it looked most like a rooster. However, it was nearly twice as large as any rooster she’d ever seen, and the traditional array of
colors had been replaced by a single, vibrant gold. Perched on the end of the divan, it cocked its head, peering at her with one eye, then the other. When she began to disentangle her legs from the blanket, it ruffled its feathers and crowed.

“Good morning to you too.” Jane stood and eyed the bird. Its large spurs made her hesitant to try shooing it away. She settled for scooting around the back side of the chaise lounge instead. “I guess you can just… stay here.”

Retreating inside with the washroom in mind, she was surprised to find Thor. It was early. The sky outside was still tinged pink with dawn. And yet, there he was looking as clean and refreshed as she probably did wrinkled and disheveled. She cleared her throat, and he turned, a smile instantly brightening his face.

“More gowns.” He gestured to the armoire. “The tailors just finished. I offered to deliver them myself.”

“That was nice of you.”

“I might also have wanted to check on you.” His contentment wavered as she crossed the room. “You didn’t change or sleep in the bed. Was it not to your liking?”

“Oh, no, everything was perfect. It had nothing to do with the room.” The thought that he might have considered her ungrateful was mortifying. “I just wanted to sit outside for a while and accidentally fell asleep out there.”

Thor seemed appeased. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very. And you?”

“As well as can be expected. Volstagg came by early to—”

A crow drowned out the rest of his sentence. Brows drawing together, Thor glanced from her to the rest of the room and back again. Jane, on the other hand, merely sighed and shrugged. “There’s a rooster on my balcony.” If only that was the strangest thing to ever happen to her. “It was there when I woke up. Actually, it woke me up.”

As bizarre as it sounded, her answer must have made sense, because he nodded. “Gullinkambi. He’s harmless, though I can’t say I’ve ever heard him crow. Mostly he just wanders the grounds.” There was a slight clicking, and they both turned to see the rooster strutting across the balustrade. “He will find his way back to Fólkvangr eventually.”

With one last craw, the rooster extended its wings and leaped from the balcony. It didn’t fly so much as coast to one of the treetops in the garden below before disappearing into the foliage. Jane thought she spied golden feathers weave through the hedges, but then Thor was tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, drawing her attention.

“I’ll leave you to get ready. Come find me when you’re finished. I’ll be in my chambers.”

Jane sat at the dressing table and slowly brushed her hair. It was amazing, the effect one bath and a change of clothes could have. Honestly, she would’ve been perfectly happy with a walk-in shower
and terrycloth robe, but the in-ground bath heated by the stones lining its interior and a dressing
gown made of the finest silk she’d ever seen were nice touches. She wasn’t going to complain.

After working through the last few tangles and changing into one of the dresses from the armoire – a
simple, toffee-hued number that was surprisingly easy to put on considering she hadn’t worn
anything like it in centuries – she slipped into the hallway. The dim torchlight had blurred away its
features the night before. Now, flooded with early morning light, it was as finely crafted as
everything else. From its architecture to its decorations to its clothing, the Realm Eternal spared no
expense.

She padded down the corridor, trailing her fingertips along the wall as she went. Thor had said his
chambers were three doors down, but when she reached the third room, a door stood to either side.
Confused, she looked back and forth between the two. Which had he said?

Taking a gamble, she knocked on the right door. “Thor?”

Nothing.

She tried the left only for it to ease open at her touch. The hinges protested, and she cringed at the
resulting squeal amplified by the empty hallway. None of the other doors opened, though, nor did
anyone emerge from around the far corner, so after a few seconds pause, she widened the gap,
opened the door enough to poke her head through.

“Thor? Are you in here?”

The room was not unlike her own – a sitting area, a large bed, a balcony – but whoever stayed there
enjoyed several additions. The single armoire had been upgraded to two, both of which were half
again as large as hers. A sort of worktable topped with various jars stood in place of a dressing table,
and the drapes that bordered the opening to the balcony had been replaced by bronze ironwork.
There were bookshelves, too, massive built-ins that surrounded the fireplace and spanned floor to
ceiling.

Jane eyed the rows of books eagerly. Learning was something she never tired of, and those would all
contain new material to her. Asgard might not put faith in science, but who knew what the rest of its
literature was like, its history, its legends. What she wouldn’t give for the chance to peruse each and
every page.

The room wasn’t a guest suite, not with its customizations. But it also wasn’t Thor’s. The firmer
lines, extensive woodwork, and stronger patterns were distinctly masculine, but that was where the
parallels ended. Nothing else fit the God of Thunder, not the built-ins or the worktable and certainly
not the colors, a striking mix of charcoal and gold. Not to mention it looked to have been unused for
some time.

“Wrong brother.” Starting at the voice, she spun around to see Thor leaning against the opposite
doorframe. He dipped his chin in her direction. “Those were Loki’s quarters.”

“I… I’m so sorry. I couldn’t remember which room you said, and you didn’t answer when I knocked
on that one. This room was open, so I just assumed…” She pulled the door shut, blushing furiously.
“I wasn’t trying to snoop.”

They met in the middle of the hallway, his easy chuckle soothing her nerves. “You act as if I will
strike you down here and now. There is no harm in a mistake, Jane.” He tipped her face to his. “And
you need never fear me.”
But therein lay an entirely different problem.

Because she didn’t fear him.

Only what he would think of her, in the end.

Thor tucked her under his arm and ushered her into his chambers. In the moments before they entered, though, Jane glimpsed movement down the hall. The person – an attendant, by the look of it – stiffened and immediately ducked into an open doorway. As they similarly disappeared, Jane frowned. Would she ever be free of prying eyes and judgmental stares?

“Asgard suits you.” Thor closed the door and motioned to his chambers in an unspoken make yourself at home before moving further in. “You look beautiful.”

She trailed him slowly, taking in the newest taste of décor. Ancestral weapons had been substituted for books, pieces of armor for corked jars, ivory and crimson for charcoal and gold. It was a fitting distinction for the two would-be brothers.

“Thank you. You look… relaxed.” He glanced at her, brows raised, one hand paused mid-grab for something on the tabletop, and she couldn’t help but laugh. “I mean that in a good way. I don’t think I’ve seen you in anything except armor since we first met. It’s nice.”

Those first few days in Puente Antiguo, Thor had worn whatever clothes she could scrounge up. Now he sported a burgundy tunic over a pair of black pants, the first of which he ran a hand down almost self-consciously. “There has been little time for rest as of late.”

“From the sound of things, that won’t be changing anytime soon.”

“No, I fear it won’t. These are dangerous times.”

The timbre of his voice had deepened, drawn down by the weight of something inevitable, but Jane was unwilling to let that solemnity remain. Thor was made for daring heroics and carefree laughter, sincerity and integrity and unrepentant affection. Gravity’s shadow had no place on his features. It just didn’t fit. And so it was with a deliberate tranquility that she wended her way towards the weapons displayed on the wall around the fireplace.

“So now that I’m here, what’s our next step?” She fingered a line of rubies inlaid in an axe handle. “What do you have planned?”

“Today? Nothing. War is imminent, but the full effects of the Convergence will not be upon us for several weeks yet. Until such a time as it cannot continue, the duties of the crown remain.” There was that reliability she knew so well, that honor. “But there is no reason for you to be similarly confined. You have the freedom to explore the palace and all it holds in my absence.”

Jane’s hand fell away from the notched edge of a dagger as she spun around. “I can look around?”

“Yes.”

“At anything? Anywhere?”

“So long as it is within the palace, yes.”

It was a thrilling offer, one that apparently pleased Thor to give as much as her to receive, if his grin was anything to go by. The ever-present scientist in her hummed to life. There was only one stray thought to dampen her excitement. “But… I’ll be alone.”
“Týr is to report on his dealings with Niðavellir soon, and after midday, the All-Father and I will hear from the people. Much as I would prefer your company, I am bound to these commitments.” He crossed to her and leaned back against the mantel. “Forgive me?”

There wasn’t anything to forgive, because it wasn’t disappointment she felt. Having spent enough years fending for herself, it wasn’t that she needed an escort. It was more how the rest of the realm would react. You do not belong here. She hadn’t forgotten the healer’s cold disposition during her first visit to Asgard.

But Thor looked so expectant and voicing the true nature of her concern would only complicate matters, so she just heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Oh, I guess so.” And then… “But only if you do me a favor in return.”

Still under the impression she was being sarcastic, he grinned. “Whatever you wish.” He didn’t notice the tension that crept across her shoulders, the way her expression sharpened, that slight hitch before the words came tumbling out.

“We need to bring Gerðr back from Jötunheim.”

The effect was instantaneous. And, if she were being honest, funny. A myriad of emotions flicked across Thor’s eyes as he did his best imitation of a fish, mouth opening and closing and opening again. He didn’t respond, though, just listened as she explained how she’d met Gerðr, the conditions of their bargain, and that the frost giantess had essentially saved her life.

When she finished, his eyes lowered. “I was with you in Midgard for four days and never once inquired as to your time in Jötunheim. Heimdall told me some of your sufferings, but I… I should have asked.” He absentmindedly traced the edges of whatever item it was he’d picked up at the worktable. “Aiding you with this is the least I can do. I will speak to my father.”

“You think that’ll work?” She arched an eyebrow. “Last time we talked to him, things didn’t go so well.”

“A life debt is something even he cannot dismiss.”

“Well, I hope you’re right.” Any lingering sense of doubt was overpowered by relief, soothing away the knots of tension. Part of her reason for coming to Asgard was the ability to make things right. Fulfilling her agreement with Gerðr was a start. “Thank you, Thor. Really. This means a lot.”

The morning sun finally broke over the palace spires, cascading onto the balcony before spilling down to the lake below. Its light marked a sharp line across the marble, the brightness of it staining the interior of the room. However, a wayward reflection off the glass table found the item curled around Thor’s fingers, and the shimmering caught her eye.

“What is this you keep messing with?” Jane reached out, and he relinquished the item easily. Items, rather, because there were two: a matching bracelet and necklace. She rubbed a thumb across the hammered gold bracelet, then the necklace’s pendant. It reminded her of a geisha’s folding fan. “They’re lovely.”

“They’re yours, if you’ll have them.”

Jane jerked to attention. “What?” But Thor was already clasping the bracelet around her wrist.

“Other jewelry might be more impressive, but these are precious to my family.” He pulled the necklace from her limp fingers and gently turned her. “They belonged to my mother.”
The pendant settled against her collarbone, and she dutifully pulled her hair to one side so Thor could fasten the chain. “She gave them to you?”

“Bequeathed. She was killed when the Chitauri stole the Tesseract.”

Everything ground to a halt. The breeze off the water, the sensation of fingers against her nape, the distant voices as the people of Asgard started their day. Even the breath in her lungs shriveled to dust. All that remained was the pendant around her neck, a weight made heavier by Thor’s awful revelation.

It all made sense now – the All-Father’s bitterness, the unanimous reaction to the queen’s name – and Jane’s heart faltered in a terrible way. When she turned back around, Thor’s face was carefully blank. She recognized that look. Time might have numbed the loss, but a current of grief remained. Would always remain. Fragmented memories of her own rose to the surface unbidden. She could taste them now like ash in her mouth, the bones of them stuck fast in her throat. Sorrow was a vast sea with few islands.

“I’m so sorry, Thor.” Compassion and empathy had her resting a hand on his arm, but it wasn’t long before she stepped back, sought the necklace’s clasp. “I can’t accept these. It’s not right.”

Thor, however, halted her movements with a gentle touch. “She would have wanted you to have them.”

“She didn’t even know me.”

“But I do.” A melancholy smile tugged at his mouth. “And I can attest that, had she met you, she would have cared for you as much as I.”

“Thor…”

“Please take them, Jane.” Then again, more quietly, his head coming to rest against hers, eyes focused unseeingly at some point between their feet, a shallow furrow between his brows. “Please.”

Before she could answer, before she could even decide how to answer – though how could she possibly say no? – someone knocked on the door. Jane pulled away instantly. Thor, on the other hand, was far slower to react. He straightened gradually, only calling out a gruff come in after he’d cleared his throat.

The door swung open to reveal one of the Einherjar. “My prince. My lady.” He bowed to each of them in turn, then faced Thor. “Lord Týr has returned from Niðavellir. The All-Father requests your presence.”

Thor nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

The Einherjar disappeared behind the door, and Jane turned to see Thor striding towards the worktable, stripping out of his tunic as he went. Her eyes automatically dipped to his sculpted torso, the way the muscles in his back rippled when he tossed the tunic aside and shrugged into a fitted undershirt, before pointedly darting to the lake outside.

She moved to the balcony and leaned against one of the columns, toying with the pendant. “Tell me about the titan.”

For a moment, it seemed Thor wouldn’t answer. The only sound that came from the room was that of his armor clicking into place. Just when she was getting ready to remind him of his promise, he sighed.
“The Realm Eternal didn’t always hold the influence she does now. In the early years after Yggdrasil’s formation, a race known as the Celestials reigned supreme. Stories say there were once billions of them. They controlled all nine realms until the Aspirants challenged them with a weapon known as the Godkiller. The resulting war wiped out both races, but before the Celestials were defeated, they created another race of beings called the Eternals.”

Jane turned. “The Celestials created them?”

“So they say.” Thor had donned everything except his cape while she’d faced the other way. Now, he fastened it to the plates on his shoulders. “In the aftermath of the war, Yggdrasil entered an age of peace. That is when Asgard rose to prominence. All existed quietly throughout the realms for several millennia, but during my great-great-grandfather’s reign, an Eternal named Thanos came into power and committed genocide against the rest. He was subsequently banished to the Void for his crimes. It was meant to be a death sentence.”

“I’m guessing he survived.”

“We heard rumors over the years, but they were discounted. Those cast into the Void never returned. No one believed escape was possible.” Jane nearly huffed a laugh. Loki had. He’d always maintained there was a chance. “But we were wrong. It was Thanos who invaded Asgard, killed my mother, and stole the Tesseract.”

The pieces were starting to fall into place. However, a significant gap remained, one that left her perplexed. “You said he also took the scepter.”

“And assisted Loki’s attack on Midgard.”

“So what does all this have to do with the Convergence?”

“Weak boundaries between the realms is one of the effects of the Convergence. You said it yourself. Thanos will not have forgotten it was Asgard that sentenced him to the Void. We believe he will use those portals and all the weapons at his disposal to wage war upon the realm. That is where you come in.” Thor leaned against the worktable and graced her with a proud smile. “You alone have the ability to track the Convergence. If you can predict when and where they will form, we will be more prepared to stand against him.”

Faith. That was what he was giving her. A staggering amount of faith. Responsibility, too, not just for the future of Asgard but all of Yggdrasil. Thor had declared his intentions when he brought her to Asgard and defended her against his father’s condemnations. He’d thrown his lot in with her for better or worse.

It was too much to take in.

And yet, there was more.

“You know I’ll help. We’d need to go back and get my equipment, but I’ll do everything I can to help stop Thanos.” Jane worried her lower lip. That small sliver of hope was back again, sparking against her traitorous heart, setting her nerve-endings alight. “But that’s not the only reason you brought me here.”

Thor shook his head. “I wish it were. The creature you saw was a son of Muspel. A fire giant. Many centuries ago, their movements became shadowed to us. Not even Heimdall could see them. We never knew how or why it started, but so long as they didn’t interfere in the realms, we were content to leave them be. Clearly, that is not the case anymore.”
All of that, she already knew. Had known for a long time. Nevertheless, she managed a slightly distressed expression around the jittery anticipation coursing through her veins.

“For all that Thanos weighs on my mind, the sons of Muspel are equally disturbing. My father believes they might be working together. I’m inclined to agree.” Thor fiddled with the strap to one of his new vambraces. “No one has been around the fire giants in over two thousand years, so we have no hope of discovering their motives. But there is someone who’s spent time with Thanos.”

The world shifted in a fundamental way, condensing and narrowing around her, but her voice remained unexpectedly steady, the single word ghosting out on the wake of her exhale. “Loki.” And the way Thor’s mouth tightened into a thin line was answer enough.

“We do not know the extent of his knowledge, but he must have gained some insight during his collaboration with the titan. Unfortunately, he will not share it with me or the All-Father or anyone in Asgard. He will speak only with you. That is his demand in return for aid.”

Another knock sounded. At the reminder of the waiting meeting, Thor pushed off from the table and bent to retrieve Mjölnir from its place at his bedside. It couldn’t have taken more than a few seconds, but it was enough for him to miss the way she swayed unsteadily, threw out a hand to the ironwork, gripped the pendant at her neck. The discussion the evening before had instilled in her a hope she was scared to embrace, but now she knew.

Loki was alive.

He was alive.

“But an immediate answer is too much to ask of you. There is a war council scheduled four days from now. A decision does not need to be made until then, so take some time to consider. Loki is not always the… easiest person to handle. I’m sure you remember that from Jötunheim.”

Still in somewhat of a daze, Jane trailed Thor into the hallway where he escorted her back to her room. They paused outside the door. The Einherjar continued to stand at attention nearby, but he had the decency to avert his eyes when Thor pulled her close.

“Enjoy the day.” His lips brushed her temple. “I’ll find you when I’m done.”

“You are troubled.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Troubled minds lead to rash decisions.”

“How very wise.”

“Were I wise, I would either advise you to return to the palace or accompany you there myself. The prince was explicit when he told you to remain within its walls.”

Jane crossed her arms, tucked her hands into the folds of the dusky blue shawl she’d retrieved from the armoire, and cast a crooked grin over her shoulder to the Gatekeeper. “That was supposed to be a private conversation.”
“So it was.” Heimdall didn’t return the gesture, but there was a playful glint in those strange burning eyes. “But I cannot always control what I see.”

Turning away, she followed the curve of the Bi-Frost. Circular engravings that faintly mimicked the World’s Tree branches covered the interior of the dome. They wound their way across the surface, curled through one another, stretched towards the sun streaming in through each of the openings. She stepped out onto the platform opposite the entrance. The sunlit waves below rippled like the scales of some ancient sea serpent. Beyond that, there was nothing but clear sky.

“What brings you back to my post so soon, Jane Foster?”

She cocked her head and watched the water pour over the edge of the realm. “A troubled mind. Don’t worry, though. I don’t plan on doing anything rash.”

“Were it planned, it wouldn’t be rash.” The dull scrape of armor sounded. When she glanced back, he’d rested his hands on the great sword’s hilt. “What weighs on you?”

“You mean you didn’t see it?”

She arched a brow, but he didn’t join in her teasing the second time around. Instead, concern bled into the vacant spaces left behind by the lighthearted atmosphere. “The people of Asgard bear you no ill will. They will come to accept your presence in time.”

A frown marred her face of its own accord. Tell that to the groups of noblemen who’d haughtily stared down their noses as she wandered the palace halls, the ladies of the court who’d tittered and whispered behind their hands, the Einherjar and their suspicious, sidelong glances. If acceptance was in her future, it was a distant, far-off thing.

It was their silent but undeniable prejudice that had eventually driven her into the castle town. There, at least, she was able to disappear into the crowd. She’d made her way down the main thoroughfare, weaved along the network of alleys between homes and taverns, and passed through the local marketplace where one of the vendors had insisted on giving her a piece of fruit that looked like a plum but tasted like a pomegranate. Before she’d even realized it, she was beneath the archway that led to the Bi-Frost, translucent crystal pulsating beneath her feet.

Blending in with the commoners had lifted her spirits. They hadn’t recognized her or known she was different. To them, she’d been just another Asgardian out for her daily wares. But the farther she’d travelled down the Rainbow Bridge, the more the truth gnawed at her, prickling beneath her skin. They’d only accepted her because they didn’t know her. If they had, their reaction would’ve probably been the same.

Jane gathered her skirt to one side, sat on the end of the platform, and let her legs dangle over the edge. For all she hated using such a childish phrase, it wasn’t fair. She was being judged for something she couldn’t help. And while that lay at the root of all bigotry, it didn’t lessen the sting of the nobility’s snub. If anything, it heightened it. The world – all of it, the whole nine realms – was a cruel place.

Scowling down at the water, she swung her feet harder than necessary. “I didn’t ask to come here.”

“Neither have you asked to leave.” Heimdall’s refutation came quietly but firmly. “Yggdrasil trembles with the coming war, and the people feel its presence more and more keenly each day. In times such as these, they look to the crown. They need to feel its guidance. They are buoyed by its strength. But what do they see now? The crown prince bringing a Midgardian woman to the Realm Eternal.”
“But I’m here to help.” The words came out harsher than she intended, but she didn’t correct it, just bit them out. “Thor brought me here to help.”

“You know that. Thor, the All-Father, Sif, and the Warriors Three know that. But the people do not. The last to come to this realm murdered their queen and left with a powerful artifact. You cannot fault them for their suspicions.”

Heimdall had the voice of a father. Gentle, understanding but stern, comforting… it was the kind of voice she could listen to for hours on end. The deep bass of it resonated within the Bi-Frost, and Jane felt herself soften in turn, the last dregs of indignation melting away.

“Give them time, my lady. They might feel differently once they see what you’ve done for Gerðr.” She nodded absently. Then she stiffened as the implication sunk in and spun around. “She’s to be returned tomorrow evening.”

“They’ve already decided?”

He tapped a finger to his temple. “Just decided.”

“Well, I guess that’s some good news.” A sudden updraft brought with it mist from the Great Sea, and Jane took cover beneath the shawl. “So what else do you see?”

“Everything. I am always watching.”

“Do you have to think about it? You know, concentrate on a specific person or realm? Or does it just… happen?”

“I look and listen, and it is there. The sight comes to me. I never have to seek it out.” Jane rubbed at her eyes. He sounded like Loki explaining how he used magic. For once, it would be nice to get a normal, straightforward answer on how things actually worked instead of one blanketed in otherworldly mysticism. “Most of what I see is of little importance. It passes by like fog, soon to be forgotten. But certain things do catch my attention.”

As suddenly as the wind had picked up, it died down. She lowered the shawl and used the ends to soak up the thin sheen of water that had settled on her dress. “Like what?”

“Unrest in the realms, potential threats to the crown… a person I’ve never before seen suddenly appearing in the midst of a life already half-lived.”

Jane fell still.

For the longest time, she’d been hidden from the Gatekeeper’s view. Loki had hidden them both to keep his actions over the centuries a secret. That Heimdall had been able to witness their plight in Jötunheim, much less her interactions with Thor, meant something had changed. At some point, the veil had been lifted. At some point, she’d been revealed.

How had she not realized it sooner? If the past few years hadn’t been so hectic, perhaps she would have. Looking back, it was painfully obvious. The pieces had all been there, she’d just failed to connect them.

“How’s that?”

Resuming her motions with what she hoped passed for nonchalance, Jane swallowed thickly.
“The eyes. Most mortals have wide eyes, brimming with ambition and full of wonder in their race against death.” The subtle grating of armor came again, this time accompanied by heavy footfalls. “However, you have deep eyes, Jane Foster.” Her teeth clenched with the effort to stay calm. “You have seen too much. More than any mortal. More than many Æsir.”

Heimdall stopped behind her, a little to the right. A dense silence full of a thousand unsaid things stretched out for a moment. When she couldn’t stand it anymore, she blew out a shaky breath and looked up to him. “Are you going to tell the All-Father?”

His gaze was set steadily out on the sky, but his head tilted slightly. “Unless you become a threat, it is not my place to tell.”

“What about Thor?”

“Your secrets are your own, as are your reasons for keeping them. I am the Gatekeeper, not the judge.”

The vice-like grip that had taken hold of her heart and lungs gradually eased, and she relaxed, leaning back onto her hands. It wasn’t as bad as she’d always imagined, someone knowing. Granted, she didn’t know Heimdall very well and he didn’t know the full extent of the truth, but still… it was nice.

A patch of clouds worked their way across the sun, and Jane watched the shadows play over the water. “Are you going to take me back to the palace?”

“No.” Heimdall shifted beside her but didn’t return to his post. “Your safety might be a priority, but from what I’ve seen, you can take care of yourself.”

“I don’t know about that.” A myriad of brief misses and close encounters and narrow victories flitted through her mind, few of which were the result of genuine skill. “Sometimes I think I just get lucky.”

“There’s no such thing, my lady.”

And as the two of them stared out into the infinite, a touch of wistfulness colored the edges of her slow smile. “So I’ve heard.”

It was a small assembly that gathered the next evening for Gerðr’s return. There was Heimdall, of course, and Freyr who stood to one side of the dais. Farther back were the All-Father, Hogun, Thor, and herself, along with a woman so beautiful Jane had suffered a self-conscious blush just being introduced.

Her name was Freyja. Leader of the Valkyries and twin sister to Freyr, she was the supposed goddess of love, beauty, magic, and war. With her flowing blonde hair, porcelain skin, subtle hint of curves, and come-hither eyes, the first two titles were practically a given, but there was an underlying strength that belied the delicate features and graceful attire. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. According to Thor, the Valkyries’ reputations were well-deserved.

“You mean they’re real?”

“Yes. There are thirteen in all. Masters of arms, they ride into battle on their winged horses.” Thor
leaned low to whisper in her ear as they drifted away from the rest of the group to a more secluded section of the Bi-Frost. “Sigrdrífa stands at Freyja’s right hand. Brynhildr, Hlökk, Randgríðr, and Guðr ride in the forefront, followed by Kára, Mist, and Róta, and finally Geirskögul, Skuld, Reginleif, and Göndul. Herja usually remains at the rear.”

“Why does she have to stay behind?”

“Herja’s strength lies not in a sword but in magic. That power proves most effective when used from a distance.” A wry sort of smile played at the corners of his mouth. “It is an impressive sight to behold. She is not called devastator without reason.”

Jane shifted her weight from one foot to the other, considering. “I didn’t know the Valkyries were warriors. The myths only refer to them as choosers of the slain.”

“And indeed they are. They sweep through a battle, choosing who they will slay.”

The echo of footsteps yanked Jane from her thoughts, and she watched the All-Father break apart from the group. No one spoke, but Freyr stiffened at the approaching noise, drew into himself almost imperceptibly. He was like a tightrope, stretched taut but fraying at the ends from the pressure. For all that the Vanir god grated on her nerves, the anxiousness he tried and failed to hide was endearing.

“Do you see her?” Odin stared up at the Gatekeeper. Atop the platform, Heimdall nodded once. “She is alone?” Another nod. “Then retrieve her.”

It all happened very quickly. The great sword was lowered into the center mechanism, Heimdall turned it to activate the Bi-Frost, a pervasive hum filled the air… then a multi-colored beam of light shot out into the evening sky. Jane took an unconscious step forward. It was one thing to travel via the Bi-Frost. It was another to witness it at work. Unfortunately, it didn’t last long. Within seconds, the light faded to reveal a familiar figure.

Gerðr stood in the opening, silhouetted by the starry backdrop. To her credit, she didn’t even appear shocked by what had just happened. Remnants of snow speckled her dark hair and clothes as she blinked silently at the party. Eventually, though, her eyes found Freyr and softened, and he began to slowly close the distance between them in response.

His focus never strayed. He didn’t so much as blink. He just stared at her with an unwavering devotion, like he was afraid she wasn’t real, as if she would disappear if he did anything less. When only inches separated them, he stopped, reached out, and hesitantly caught her hand.

“Hjertet mitt…” Freyr bowed low and brought her fingers to his lips. “Jeg er din for alltid.”

Gerðr placed her other hand on his head, carded her fingers through his hair. “Og jeg, din.” Then she drew him up.

They stood there, foreheads touching, eyes closed, radiant in the warm light of the Bi-Frost against the rain of stars. It was quite the romantic scene – movie-worthy, really – and across the room, Jane smiled. My heart, I am forever yours. And I, yours. Perhaps she’d been too harsh in her initial assessment. Maybe, deep down, the Vanir god and his jötun wife weren’t as bad as she thought.

“All’s well that ends well.” Thor curled an arm over her shoulders. “Shall we go?”

The group filed out, giving the reunited couple a moment alone. Even Heimdall retreated to the entrance and turned his back. They were halfway down the Rainbow Bridge, suspended in the darkness between the glow of the Bi-Frost and that of the city, before conversations began to break out. Thor recounted details from some meeting with Hogun. Ahead of them, Odin bent his head to
Freyja. Jane, however, walked along in silence, lost in the vision of the embracing couple, convicted by their quiet, unshakable devotion.

“I’ll do it.”

Jane turned away from the balustrade. The fingers that had been tapping out a nonsensical rhythm against the marble wrung each other nervously, but if Thor was aware of her agitation, he didn’t acknowledge it. He merely glanced up to her from his seat at the table. “Hm?”

“Talk to Loki. I’ll do it.” The cloth that had been buffing Mjölnir went still. She had his undivided attention now. “But I want to do it alone. I don’t want anyone else there.”

Slowly, Thor stood. “You’re sure?” She nodded mutely, and he set the hammer aside. “Very well. I should inform the All-Father immediately. Plans will need to be made, most likely for tomorrow morning if it can be arranged.” He ran a hand down her arm. “Thank you, Jane.”

Night leaned against the walls of the palace around them as she watched him get ready to leave. There was one timeless second where she thought her strength would fail her, that she wouldn’t do it, that her courage would falter on the wayside… then her hand darted out, fingers wrapping around his wrist.

“Thor, wait.”

Jane’s heart hammered in her throat. She wasn’t ready. Then again, she never would be. She was standing on the precipice, unsure if the leap would result in flight or broken bones. But she had to do it. She had to. Even if she shattered on the rocks below, she would jump. For him, she would jump.

Gathering herself, she stepped back and met the question in Thor’s eyes with a fearless determination. This was how things would be made right.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Chapter End Notes

Things are about to get interesting! Tune in next time to see Jane and Loki reunite! On another note, there were a ton of references scattered throughout this chapter.

Gullinkambi is one of three roosters whose crowing is said to signal the beginning of Ragnarök. It’s claimed he lives in Valhalla, but for the purposes of this story, he’ll be staying in Fólkvangr, Freyja’s dwelling where it’s said she takes half of the slain in battle. Ægir is the god of law and heroic glory who, in the myths, sacrificed his hand in order to bind Fenrir, a giant wolf that plays a part in Ragnarök.

Also, all of the Valkyries mentioned in this chapter are ones described in the Prose or Poetic Edda. There are more, but I narrowed them down to the following thirteen for reasons that will be made clear later in the story:

Sigdrífa – inciter to victory
Brynhildr – bright battle
Guðr – battle
Randgríðr – shield destroyer
Hlökk – noise of battle
Kára – wild, stormy one
Mist – clouds
Róta – sleet and storm
Herja – devastate
Göndul – wand wielder
Geirskögul – spear shaker; high-towering
Skuld – debt
Reginleif – power-trace

Stuck in the middle of all that mythology was a nod to the comics. Thanos’ origin story and everything about the Celestials and Eternals was pulled from those.

Lastly, so sorry to those of you who commented and messaged hoping Frigga wouldn’t die. I would’ve changed it, but it’s been a part of the outline since the beginning. Unfortunately, this is war and bad things happen.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY for how long this chapter took. The past year has been so insanely busy, but in the best way possible! New job, new house, first baby, etc. It’s been a blast. I was constantly missing this story, though, and all of you! Your messages, comments, and reviews kept me motivated to come back. I really can’t say enough how wonderful you all are!

I pledge my eternal love to subjunctivemood! Even after I disappeared for over a year, she was ready to jump back in right away. She’s the absolute best beta I could ask for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Six

“I am no one. I am nothing. I am a blank paper on which you and your magic wrote a girl, all hungry and hurt and needing.”

2013: The Dungeons of Asgard

Sunlight streamed down the stairwell, flowing over the stone steps and walls like liquid gold before eventually dwindling away to be replaced by periodic spheres of torchlight. The darkness surrounding them was a tangible thing. Musty. Ancient. It writhed against the flickering light, more insistent and suffocating the deeper underground the stairs went.

Shivering in the damp air, Jane descended quickly towards the narrow slash of light ahead. It was the entrance to the dungeons. Rather, one of the entrances. After much discussion, the All-Father had decided she would enter the back way, which prevented her from making the long walk past all the other prisoners and would instead bring her out in the rear of the dungeon.

But it wasn’t the journey that had her stomach in knots.

It was the destination.

She and Loki hadn’t exactly left off on the best of terms. Their last conversation had been halting and antagonistic, brimming with barely-contained resentment, shot through with hurt and betrayal. Jane worried her lower lip as the entrance grew larger. That he was asking for her at all was a good sign. It reinforced her hope that the bridges they’d forged hadn’t been entirely burned, that it wasn’t too late. But Loki could be unpredictable. And self-serving. And she wasn’t naïve enough to believe he’d wanted her to come simply because he missed her.

The path eventually leveled out, mildew-covered stone giving way to the clean, sharp lines of the
dungeons as she passed through the doorway. She paused for a moment in the brighter light. To her left was a small room packed full of manacles, chains, and confiscated possessions, with an Einherjar standing guard. Ahead was a closed door, outside of which lay a heap of soiled clothing waiting to be laundered. Down the corridor to her right was the first cell.

Most of the interior was hidden by the stone wall. The current angle only provided her with a glimpse of ivory carpet, an ebony bookshelf, and a sculpted chair through the shimmering barrier. It only took a few steps, though, to bring the entirety of the cell into view.

Jane saw him first. Sprawled out on a divan with one leg draped casually over the armrest, he was repeatedly tossing something into the air. Whatever he’d endured hadn’t broken him. Not yet. He looked the same as he ever had, all slick arrogance and nonchalant features and quiet defiance. Her breath hitched, and she unconsciously pulled the wrap tighter around her shoulders. Would she ever not be affected by him?

Steeling herself, she stepped further into view and waited. Loki never missed anything. He’d always been unnaturally attuned to his surroundings, like the supposed magic he wielded made him hyperaware of any similar veins that flowed through the rest of Yggdrasil. However, he didn’t respond to her presence immediately. Perhaps whatever power kept him contained in the cell was to blame, but it took three more tosses before he caught the item, quirked his head, then sat up to face her.

Jane clasped her hands to hide her fingers’ trembling and spoke in little more than a plaintive whisper. “Hey.”

The barrier did nothing to disguise the intensity of his eyes, and she tumbled into their stormy depths without contest. There was little point in fighting when she was powerless to resist. If he was a titan planet, she would forever be a moon. Everything about him drew her in, and she couldn’t help but orbit him. That was the way things were. They would circle each other in a cosmic dance until the stars rained down from the sky.

“So they did send you. I was beginning to wonder.”

“I wasn’t sent. They gave me the choice.” Such a minor detail, but it felt important that he know, whatever good it might do. “I wanted to come.”

“Of course you did.” Loki leaned over to place the item he’d been tossing on a nearby table. When he drew back, she recognized it as the black knight of a chess set. “You never were able to resist the allure of answers. I knew if I dangled the carrot, you would come.”

Jane dragged her focus from both the chessman and the remembrance of countless games played against one another. “You know that wasn’t the only reason.”

“Do I?”

“I wanted to see you.” But then, that wasn’t completely accurate. The force that drove her was stronger than some simple desire, more vital. “I needed to.”

“And now you have. Our circumstances should bring back fond memories.” Loki rested his elbows on his knees and steepled his fingers. “So often we’ve been in this position… is this how we’re to meet for the rest of the ages? On opposing sides, separated by prison bars?”

“Don’t say that, Loki. I’ve only ever been on your side.”

His hands did little to hide the cruel twist of his mouth. “Yes, I can tell. You begged for my aid then
abandoned me to the mercy of your new friends. Such honor. Those are clearly the actions of a true and loyal companion.”

A low whistle echoed throughout the dungeon, interrupting Jane’s train of thought. Across the way was another cell. Its occupant stood just shy of the surrounding barrier, wedged into the closest corner, barely visible around the nearest column. He looked like any of the other Asgardians, only more feral. His hair was long and unkempt, beard scraggly, eyes savage. Blue paint was smeared over both cheekbones with trails extending down his face and neck. Realizing he had her attention, the prisoner jeered.

“That’s Högne.”

Jane’s nose wrinkled. “Charming.”

“He’s one of the Marauders imprisoned for rebelling against the Realm Eternal. Not much for intelligent conversation, but he does like to talk. I’ve heard what he likes to do to women at great length. Particularly those who do not desire his company.” Loki smiled when her eyes cut to him. “He very much prefers the ones who put up a fight.”

“Are you trying to scare me?”

“Merely introducing you to the company I am now forced to keep.” Another whistle drew her attention back to Högne, who winked. “He seems to be quite taken with you.” When she didn’t react, Högne flicked his tongue in an obscene gesture and rubbed a hand suggestively over his crotch. “You should hope he doesn’t escape.”

Turning so she could no longer see Högne or his crude gesticulations, Jane held fast to the past. “You wouldn’t let anything happen to me.” It was like a lifeline, that long-ago promise. The only one she had left.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. After all that has transpired, I might not be so inclined to rescue you.”

“I know what I did was—”

“What you did?” The volume of his voice didn’t change, but the derision laced through it was a whip, cracking, stinging. “What, exactly, did you do?”

“If you’ll just hear—”

“Wait, I remember. You did nothing.” In one sharp motion, he stood and stalked closer. The cell was already a couple steps above the dungeon floor, so when he finally stopped before the barrier, he all but loomed over her. “Tell me, how did it feel to leave me behind?”

“Loki, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want apologies, I want answers. Come now, Jane, it’s a simple question. Surely someone who believes herself capable of unravelling the complexities of Yggdrasil’s pathways can explain.” His lip curled. “Or perhaps you’d prefer a different one. How did it feel to have Thor’s arms around you as you watched them lead me away?”

Jane’s heart twinged. Knowing she deserved his scorn didn’t make it hurt any less. “I was a coward. Is that what you want me to say? I stayed quiet because I was too scared to tell anyone the truth.”

“Spare me your lies. You stayed quiet because you were ashamed. Of me. Of us.”
“I am not ashamed.”

“Aren’t you, though? You worry Thor would not have you if he knew I claimed you first. You worry what he would think if he knew how badly you once wanted me.” Loki ground out the words through a snarl. The viciousness of his accusation had her taking an involuntary step back, and he sneered at the reaction. “That’s right, run away. Run back to Thor and whatever safe, pampered life he can offer. You’ve spent your whole life running. Why stop now?”

It felt like the beginning of the end. Or maybe it was the end of the beginning. They had experienced their ups and downs and still come out on top. Even when she hadn’t known him, they’d somehow made it through. But something had changed in New York. It had become the turning point, one that splintered the road they’d been on and propelled them onto a new path.

For them to succumb to it, though…

For a rift like that to open between them…

The overhead lights caused shadows to gather in the hollows of his eyes, and Jane gazed up into the dark pools. It wasn’t just about her choosing her own security over him anymore, or him casting off Erik as a means to an end. They were a part, yes, but the hurt ran so much deeper than that, trailed so much farther back.

It was no wonder they decided to make Thor king and no wonder the rest of Asgard prefers Thor. It was he’d fight for my honor instead of hiding me away and I don’t have to know him personally to know he’s probably everything you’re not. It was you’re nothing more than a monster.

It was what will you do when you have nothing and how will you cope when you’re all alone. It was I was the only unchanging thing in your world of constant change, and now you won’t even have that. It was I wanted to watch the light of your foolish dreams fade from your eyes.

Those were the hurts that haunted them and dogged their steps, the ones that had festered and warped what they once shared into something unrecognizable. Not all was lost, though. It couldn’t be. There had to be something she could do so they wouldn’t have to spend the rest of eternity so horribly unfinished, so broken, so poorly mended. There had to be a way back to who they once were. But how? How was she supposed to heal a wound that never bled?

“I told him. I told Thor about us.”

By bringing secrets long-held to light.

By disproving all those hurts from so long ago.

By declaring her choice and where her heart truly lay.

Contempt morphed into a carefully guarded expression almost instantaneously. Loki was too vigilant to allow his thoughts to be read so easily, to play across his face as so many others would, but he did tilt his head slightly in consideration. The seconds ticked soundlessly by, and it was quite some time before he dipped his chin, the barest hint of a smirk dancing at the corners of his mouth.

“Was he angry?”

All that time spent pondering, and that was his first response. It was so characteristic – so undeniably Loki – that Jane could have laughed in relief. There were at least some things that never changed.

“Would it make you happy if I said yes?”
“I cannot deny his anger would give me some small measure of satisfaction.”

“It’s disturbing, you know. The amount of pleasure you get from hurting Thor.”

One shoulder rose and fell in a shrug. “The idea of him bedding you is not one I particularly care to entertain.”

“Well, I hate to disappoint you, but he wasn’t angry. Hurt, yes. Betrayed, too, but not angry.” She bit back a sigh as her eyes lowered to the nervous tangle of her fingers. “It probably would’ve been easier if he had.”

Thor paced back and forth across the length of the balcony, cloak slicing through the air with each brisk turn, while Jane watched apprehensively from the balustrade. Every so often, he’d rub at his beard and mumble something unintelligible under his breath as he sifted through the wealth of details she’d just presented. It was a lot to take in. All in all, he seemed to be managing rather well, even if he looked a bit paler than usual.

Without warning, he paused halfway through one stretch and glanced at her. “When did you say it happened?”

“1021.”

“A thousand years. A thousand years you shared with him.” His eyes flicked between hers. There was a quiet sort of disappointment to his every movement that, while not unexpected, cut to her core. “It’s no surprise you….” He trailed off abruptly, shook his head, and resumed pacing.

Jane pushed away from the cool marble. “It’s no surprise I what?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” A dense silence filled the space between them until he paused again on the far side of the balcony, eyes trained on some indeterminable point in the distance. “Was any of it real?”

“I swear I didn’t know when we first met. The amnesia wasn’t a lie. I didn’t remember everything until I was brought back from Jötunheim.”

“So you knew when last I was in Midgard.”

Jane swallowed thickly. “Yes.”

What an unmitigated mess she’d made of things. Her attempts at self-preservation had only served to alienate both Thor and Loki. She was now two-for-three when it came to people spurning her. Heimdall was the only one not to, but that was only because he was objective, hadn’t been directly hurt by her selfishness. Who would’ve thought silence could be so damaging?

A lilting trill drifted down from the network of vines creeping along the palace wall, and Jane turned towards the sound. There, half-hidden among the foliage, was a bird. Tiny with a mix of grey and brown feathers, it reminded her of a nightingale in both appearance and song. She followed it for a moment as it hopped from one vine to the next. However, when another bird flitted by too closely, it took flight with a warble, and she looked back to find Thor watching her.

“I think it best you leave.”

“Thor…” Jane took one faltering step before catching herself at the hand he raised.

“What’s done is done. I can no more change the past than I can your heart, so it is to the future I
must look. None of this changes the fact that Loki has information that might help. I must speak with my father if we are to make arrangements for your meeting.”

He stopped at the table to retrieve Mjölnir. The warm, bright finery of the room backlit him in a terrible contrast, blurred the normally strong and assured lines of his profile, faded him at the edges, and Jane felt her heart break a little bit even as he cast her a sorrowful ghost of a smile.

“I am… grateful you told me.”

“I’ve always cared for you, Thor. My memories coming back didn’t change that, it just…” Words fell short. Or maybe it was that she couldn’t bring herself to continue that thread, not after everything else. She rubbed one arm regretfully. “I never meant to hurt you.”

Before, he would have approached her. He would have enveloped her in an embrace, stroked her hair, and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. He would have done everything in his power to drive out the guilt that lined her features.

Now he merely adjusted his grip on Mjölnir and turned away.

“It’s late, and there is still much to do.” The still night air amplified his footsteps as he crossed the room, carried the blunt farewell he called over his shoulder after opening the door. “Return to your chambers, Jane. An attendant will come for you when it’s time.”

“I wouldn’t let it worry you.” Smooth stone returned as Jane blinked away the memory of being left behind, of the sense of finality that came with the door thudding shut. “Thor’s good-natured to a fault. He doesn’t know how to hold a grudge. Most likely he’s already forgiven you.”

She huffed a doubtful laugh. “Yeah, I’m not so sure about that.”

True to his word, it was one of the Einherjar who’d fetched her this afternoon. Similarly, when she arrived in the throne room to discuss what would happen next with the All-Father, the distance Thor maintained was obvious. Forgiveness would eventually come. He was too good a man for anything else. It would take time, though, and that was something she could give. She owed him that much.

“You know what the worst part is? It felt good. Not hurting him, so don’t give me that look. I mean having it all out in the open, no more secrets. It was liberating.” A small, melancholy smile eased across her face. “I didn’t know the weight until I felt the freedom.” She understood, now, how Hester Prynne must have felt. Fiddling with the ends of the shawl, she peeked at Loki through her lashes. “Would you have told Thor if I hadn’t?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t tell me that surprises you.” Before she could return to the shawl, she caught a glimpse of the condescension that overtook Loki’s expression, that imperiousness she knew so well. “Did you honestly expect I would do nothing?”

“No.”

“Did you think I’d sit idly by while you courted, slept with, and eventually wed another man?”

“No.”

“Would you have even wanted me to?”
“No.” She briefly closed her eyes to the stone walkways and the wrap twisted through her fingers and the steady pulse of light from the barrier. “I want you to know I haven’t slept with Thor. Even when I didn’t remember anything, the thought of it felt wrong.” When she opened them again, Loki was watching her intently. “It’s only ever been you.”

There was the hint of change, of something slowly beginning to unravel, and yet… “Such is the curse of humanity, to be constantly drawn to those things that are worst for them.”

Always so guarded, so afraid to look for the good in things, so sure of the destiny-forged pit at the core of his being slowly consuming him from the inside out. They were his ever-constant traits. A multitude of doubts rooted too deeply to be dispelled. She knew. She’d spent years trying. It was maddening, sometimes, to witness the gradual descent of someone who refuses to believe in something better.

But Jane was nothing if not stubborn. If there was one thing she hoped to accomplish in her long life, it was to convince him how wrong he was, and so she shrugged in a teasingly offhand way. “I don’t know… you’re not so bad.”

The strained currents of the air changed shape, eased and settled around them as one corner of Loki’s mouth twitched and she offered up a crooked grin of her own in response. And just like that it was done. They’d bridged the gap. Taken the first step, at the very least. For all their faults and all the ways they clashed, they weren’t beyond repair.

“I’ve been so worried. No one ever said what your punishment would be. I was scared what I’d find once I got to Asgard.” She shifted closer, stopping just shy of the first step leading up to the cell. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

With an arched brow, Loki gestured to his surroundings. “If this can be considered living.”

“It’s better than the alternative. I didn’t know if they were going to imprison you or… or…” She couldn’t even bring herself to say it.

“The All-Father planned to. It was only Frigga who stayed his hand.”

A new wave of sorrow welled up at the reminder of what had been lost. She tried to hide it, but the mirror of it in Loki’s features was enough to snag at her, drive her up the steps. “I was—”

“Careful, Jane.” She jerked to a stop and followed his focus to the barrier separating them, belatedly registering a pervasive hum that filled the dungeon air. “I wouldn’t touch it. Most of its energy is directed inward, but the exterior is warded enough to discourage anyone from freeing a prisoner. It’ll do more than sting.”

The barrier sparkled innocently as she wrapped one arm around her waist. “I was sorry to hear she’d passed away.”

“Killed. There’s no need to sugarcoat it. She was murdered.”

“Still…” She absently fingered the bare spot below her clavicle. Before leaving Thor’s room the night before, she’d left the necklace and bracelet on his worktable – it wasn’t right of her to keep it – but if he’d noticed, he hadn’t said anything. Then again, he hadn’t said much of anything to her today. “It’s never fair when bad things happen to good people. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“It was midday. There are plenty tending to the gardens at that time. She should have been safe.”
Something nagged at the back of her mind. “I thought the Chitauri went to the vault.”

“They did, but that wasn’t where they found her. No, she was in the gardens with one of her ladies-in-waiting.” Loki’s jaw clenched, teeth grinding over each other. “Thanos took the time to specifically seek her out.”

“Why?”

“Revenge.” The answer came in a quietly scathing tone, one painted over with a sort of fallen grandeur. “Frigga’s life was the first of what will likely become many costs for my actions in Midgard.”

Jane reached out and let one hand hover before the barrier, felt the energized buzz of it in her bones, watched the material glow a bit brighter at her proximity. *You will never understand what all I have sacrificed for you.* Loki was right. She didn’t understand. She doubted she ever fully would. But then, neither of them had realized back then how steep the price could be.

“I am sorry.” Part of her couldn’t help but take the blame. She’d been the one to plead his help, after all, even if he’d already made the preparations himself. “I know how much it hurts.”

Loki turned away. “I have never wanted to kill someone so much. Not Skaði when she bound me beneath the serpent or the All-Father when he sentenced me to this never-ending hell. Not even the Chitauri after all the tortures they devised. And it’s not just his death I want. That would be too easy. I want him to *suffer.*” He issued a dry chuckle. “It seems I truly am my father’s son.”

Without warning, he glanced back at her sharply. She hadn’t planned on broaching that subject. In fact, she’d had every intention of steering well clear of it. But whatever he saw on her face must have been answer enough.

“You know.” His lips tightened into a thin line. “Who told you?”

“No one. I figured it out for myself after I was already back from Jötunheim. It was the ice. The section you melted when we were trying to escape. Gerðr had told me that ice formed by a jötun could only be dismissed by one. That was the only explanation.” Jane frowned when he turned his back on her again. “How long have you known?”

“Not long enough.” Tension was threaded through his stiff posture, the tight grip of his fingers, the way his shoulders inched upwards. “My entire life has been a lie.”

“If it makes you feel better, you’re not the only one. Maybe that’s why we make such a good pair.” The meager attempt at lightening the mood fell flat, and she ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t care, you know. It doesn’t change the way I feel about you. You’re still the same person you’ve always been.”

“And how is that?”

Jane almost snorted. “You are the epitome of consistency, Loki. You’re the least-changed person I’ve—”

“No.” He lowered himself into the closest chair and fixed her with an unexpectedly mischievous gaze. “How do you feel about me?”

Oh.

*Oh.*
Her heart skipped a beat, and her mouth ran dry. Of everything that had weighed on her mind when entering the dungeon, that was the one thing she wasn’t prepared to discuss. They’d never fully addressed that subject before. Avoiding it had always been a sort of unspoken agreement. Taboo, in a way. Forbidden.

Sure, they’d skirted the issue at times – *my body may be in the Realm Eternal, but my mind is in Midgard; I want you; you’re not the only one who burns* – but neither of them had ever blatantly addressed whatever it was they shared. The one time they’d strayed too close – *come back with me* – the world had come crashing down around them. And yet, there they were, him waiting expectantly while she struggled to bring her chaotic thoughts into some semblance of order.

“Jane?”

Grey-green eyes searched her own with a peculiar insistence, and as she scanned his form – the quiet tautness of it, a coil wound too tightly – awareness clicked into place. This wasn’t some merciless teasing. He wanted to hear her say it. Needed it. She was just as lacking as he, fell short more often than not, but maybe that was what always drew them back together. They found completeness in each other. Two halves of a whole.

“Most of the time, when I look at you, I remember the good. All the things we’ve shared and how unbelievable it is that we’ve come to this point. How no one knows me – will ever know me – like you do. Other times, all I can see are the mistakes we’re going to make. But I don’t care anymore. I’ve missed you. So much that it hurts. All those years apart… it’s like I was just spinning in place. Like I can’t get any traction without you. When everything else is falling apart, you’re the one thing I can always come back to. You’re my rock, Loki. You’re my anchor.”

And there was the truth of it. Despite everything that had happened, she still wanted him, would always want him, would always choose him in the end. She refused to believe in fate, but there was no denying that some people belonged together. She and Loki were meant for each other in this life. In whatever life. When faced with the endless span of immortality, she needed him by her side.

The gravity of her admission wound around them in slow, easy spirals. Within the cell, Loki’s attention was fixed on her, unwavering, and Jane stretched out a hand to the barrier again. Her nerves thrummed in time with its power, alight with the overwhelming need to go to him. When she got too close, sparks flashed in the darkness like miniature fireworks.

“I should have gone with you.”

Loki’s brow furrowed ever so slightly. “What?”

“That day in Stora Karlsö when you asked me to go with you to Asgard, I should have taken your offer.” Tears pricked the corners of her eyes at the thought of what might have been, all the pain that could’ve been avoided. “If I hadn’t been so prideful, things—”

“No.” He shook his head. “You were right to refuse.”

“But if I had, none of this would have ever happened.”

“Or it might have transpired regardless.” It all boiled down to the same discussion they’d had a thousand times before, and the familiarity of it tugged at her heart as she watched Loki cross to stand before her. “A different argument, a different setting, a different sequence of events… they could have led to the same end. When all is said and done, fate always gets her way.”

Jane wanted nothing more in that moment than to fall into him. She swayed with the urge, it was so
strong. She wanted to feel the solidity of his arms around her, press her cheek to his chest and hear his heartbeat, breathe in the crisp, clean scent of him. One tear broke free to course a scalding path down her cheek, and Loki’s eyes immediately flicked away to follow its progress before drifting up to linger on her hairline. She knew then what treacherous thought haunted him.

“It was an accident. You didn’t do that to me.”

She’d tripped. Plain and simple. Distracted by the afterimage of a Loki who’d already left the realm, she hadn’t been paying attention and tripped. There was nothing he could have done. But the way his face twisted spoke volumes. There is only one act I truly regret. If fate meant she would have lost her memories no matter what, then he was imagining a hundred, a thousand, a million different ways in which she’d fall and he wouldn’t be there to catch her.

“I might as well have.” Loki’s voice was slow to reach her, low and rich as smoke. “I came to you in the years after it happened, but the damage had already been done. I couldn’t heal you. I couldn’t make you remember.”

“You…” The confession took her by surprise, and she trailed off.

She’d never really given much thought to what Loki had been doing in those in-between years. After the fallout of Stora Karlsö, she just assumed he’d written her off until their unexpected reunion in Asgard forced them together once more. It wouldn’t have been unlike him. But she’d been wrong. Jane rifled through the haze of memories.

A snowy Canadian morning…

The handsome stranger outside the observatory…

She did know, she just hadn’t made the connection. Now full realization all but slammed into her, shattering whatever peace she’d managed to make with her guilt. He’d come back to apologize. After all the hurtful things that had been said, he’d swallowed his pride and approached her first, even tried to heal her. And she hadn’t known him.

It made everything all the more tragic.

They’d been through so much, the two of them.

“We’ve both made a lot of mistakes, and we’ve both paid for them. I think it’s time we move forward, figure out what comes next.” Edging closer to the stone wall that marked the corner of the cell, Jane leaned one shoulder against it. “What will you do now?”

Loki scoffed. “What can I do?”

“If you were free, I mean. If you could go anywhere, do anything, what would you do?”

“We are, all of us, crafted with a purpose in mind. My future is—”

“Your future is whatever you want it to be. It blows my mind to see you so convinced of these stories that you’d let them dictate your actions without a second thought. That’s the easy way out. It’s passive and weak and…” Jane raked a hand through her hair, frustrated. “Where’s the Loki I know? The God of Mischief, the Lie-Smith? The one who takes on jötnar and defies titans?”

It was there. He was too proud to confess it, but she could see it behind millennia of ingrained beliefs and unfailing resolve. Surrender. The quiet, almost fearful hope for something more. But conviction was one of the hardest things to break, and she could feel the war still waging within him even
before his last-ditch refutation.

“These events have been in motion since the beginning of the ages. Fate would say any attempt to change them would be in vain. Who are you to question the Norns?”

“I’m the person you made me. And I don’t give a damn about fate.” In the end, that was it. He’d taken a tenacious, dying girl and crafted something dangerous out of her. “Now tell me, what would you do if you were freed? You. Not some person in a story.”

The barrier glinted merrily between them, wholly at odds with the way Loki’s gaze darkened, sharpening into something equally thrilling and terrifying to behold. “I would track down Thanos. I would tear apart everything he is.”

 Feeling lighter than she had in years, Jane nodded. “Good.” It was exactly what she’d wanted, hoped, needed to hear. “I hope you remember that.”

She pushed away from the wall, returned to the main walkway, and motioned to the Einherjar she’d passed when entering the dungeon. Immediately, the guard disappeared up the stairs. When she turned back, Loki was regarding her suspiciously, eyes darting back and forth between her and the now-empty stairwell.

“You’re not going to ask me anything else about Thanos or Surtur? I know that’s what the All-Father wanted.”

“No, I figure you can tell him yourself when we go to the war council.” She casually adjusted the wrap around her shoulders, hiding an uncontainable grin behind the curtain of her hair. “It’s been moved up to tomorrow morning, so don’t make any plans. It would look pretty bad if you skipped out after I vouched for you.”

As if on cue, a low rumbling began to echo throughout the sprawling dungeon. Dust clouded the air while the other prisoners looked around for what they knew was coming. Loki’s focus, however, remained trained on her, body eerily still. Then the barrier separating them wavered, blinked, and went out.

It was a testament to Loki’s self-control, the way he merely gathered himself, inhaled deeply, allowed one hand to pass through vacant space where the barrier had been. “How, may I ask, did you manage this?”

“Turns out the All-Father felt at least a little more lenient after learning the truth about what happened in New York. Also, he kind of needs me. There was an attack on Alfheim last night no one saw coming. Heimdall couldn’t see what happened until it was already over.” From what the Gatekeeper had described, the Chitauri’s attack on the peaceful realm had been devastating. “I’m the only one who can predict the spatial extrusions associated with the Convergence. Apparently, that gives me some leverage.”

“We cannot allow what occurred in Alfheim to happen elsewhere. You will aid us?”

“Yes.” Worrying her lower lip, Jane cast a quick glance around the throne room. Odin was seated between the twin arcs of Asgard’s throne, Einherjar were scattered around the perimeter while the Warriors Three and Sif hovered near the main entrance. Thor stood to her right, but if the way he was pointedly ignoring her was any indication, she’d get no help from him. This was not going to go well. “If you free Loki.”

Hushed murmuring filled the room, only ceasing when Odin lifted a hand. “This is not a
negotiation. We will retrieve your machines from Midgard, you will aid us in predicting the Convergence, and Loki will remain in his cell.”

“No.”

Thor turned to her sharply. “Jane—”

“No.” She met the God of Thunder’s frown with a determined glare of her own. “I’m done leaving him behind. I will not help without him.”

“If what you say is true regarding his rebellion against the Mad Titan, he will be granted a lesser sentence.” On the raised dais, Odin stood and planted his weapon with a thud of finality. “However, your devotion does not erase nor excuse what he’s done. Until the Convergence has passed, he remains where he is.”

“Then I rescind my offer.”

Again, the bystanders began to whisper. Odin didn’t move to stop them this time, though, just looked to Thor with a withering expression. “You see the trouble they cause, what we are forced to tolerate? Nothing good comes from dealing with humans. You would do well to remember that next time the temptation to involve yourself in their affairs arises.” With barely-contained disgust, he turned back to her. “The entirety of Yggdrasil is at stake. Should Thanos succeed, everyone and everything you cherish will be turned to ash. You know this. You know this, and you choose him anyway. Over the well-being of the realms. Over all others.”

“I do.” Jane held his hard-edged gaze, unyielding and unrepentant. “Maybe if you had, too, we wouldn’t be in this position right now.”

Finally deciding to cross the threshold, Loki descended the steps. Some distant, abstract part of her mind coolly noted that Newton’s third law was, indeed, true. For every movement that brought them closer together, there was an almost painful tightening in her chest.

“I told them I wouldn’t help unless they freed you.” He paused before her – too close and not close enough all at once – and she swallowed thickly. “Please don’t make me regret it.”

Please forgive me…

Please don’t leave me…

Please don’t run…

“I’m not a good man.”

“No, you’re not.” He’d killed, he’d lied, he’d hurt. But then, so had she. “You’re not what they say you are, though.”

Then the last bit of space between them disappeared in one smooth step. He fingered the edges of her wrap, ghosted over the curve of her shoulder, traced the line of her jaw, and goosebumps broke out across her arms when his hand buried itself in her hair. With a soft exhale, he all but curled into her, forehead resting against hers.

“One of these days, you will lose faith in me.”

“You definitely don’t make it easy, Loki. You never have. But I will never give up on you.”
There, in the middle of an otherworldly dungeon with the weight of fate resting on their shoulders, Jane shifted impossibly closer. She curled her hands around his elbows and closed her eyes and breathed him in. Cedar, frost, magic…

It felt like a new beginning.

It felt like coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Not a whole lot to say other than “I didn’t know the weight until I felt the freedom” is a line pulled from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. This chapter pretty much speaks for itself.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

“This is how easily one foot sinks into the ground.”

A crow pierced the otherwise quiet morning, and Jane peeked through half-lidded eyes. The patchwork sky was only just beginning to temper with the promise of dawn, but there was just enough light to make out Gullinkambi’s silhouette on the balcony. Today marked her fourth morning in Asgard. That made four days in a row of being awakened in the same manner. She had to do something about that rooster.

With a groan, Jane rolled onto her back.

And tilted her head.

And frowned.

To compliment the coloring of the room, her bed was carved from a rich mahogany-like wood. Intricate scrollwork crawled up the posts to meet two swaths of ivory chiffon that crossed overhead in broad arcs like the curve of an archer’s bow. Above that, elegant filigree covered the entire ceiling before spilling down the walls to fashion the many sconces placed around the room.

However, the features to which she was accustomed had been replaced by an entirely different set. Bedposts so dark they were almost black, burnished gold canvas, stone ceilings that eventually gave way to marble walls... there was also the ironwork dividing the room from the balcony, something she should’ve noticed sooner, and the bookshelves that framed the fireplace opposite her. Each detail was familiar in a reminiscent kind of way. Like how the first day of winter with its frigid breeze and overcast skies never failed to remind her of Norway, of home.

Jane silently perused the trappings and decorations of a room that didn’t belong to her, a room she instinctively knew despite only seeing it briefly once before. Was it real? Could it be real? She hesitantly reached out across the bed, silky sheets sliding like water over her skin. It felt real enough. Then again, so had her nightmares over the years. But when she came into contact with the lean swell of a bicep, breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding rushed out in a shaky exhale.
She flattened a hand on his chest, comforted by the rhythmic rise and fall, and she smiled faintly. “This is not where I fell asleep.” Her fingers crept down the laddering ribcage at the lack of acknowledgment, earning her a muffled grunt, the muscles twitching in response. A hand firmly clasped hers before she could dip into the sensitive space beneath the last bone.

“It’s early. Go back to sleep.”

“I can’t. Gullinkambi won’t stop crowing until the sun is up.” As if she could even if he stopped. There was too much delight coursing through her veins to sleep now, too much relief. Turning onto her side, she propped her head in one hand and stared down at the refined features she knew so well. “Did you use your magic to get me here or carry me down the hall?”

Eyes still closed, Loki issued the long-suffering sigh of someone who’s realized he’s fighting a losing battle. “Does it matter?”

“Not really. I just like the idea of you sneaking—”

“I do not sneak.”

“—into my room and trying to figure out the best way to get me back to yours. Did you check the hallways to make sure the coast was clear? Were you careful not to hit my head on the doorframes? Unless you took me through space-time. More graceful, but far less amusing. Honestly, though, I don’t know how you managed either without waking me up. I must have been more tired than…” When he abandoned all attempts at sleep to level her with a keen stare, she trailed off. “What?”

“I do not sneak.”

Jane snorted. “Yeah, okay.” The God of Mischief who had repeatedly used his powers to invisibly shadow her over the centuries had the audacity to claim he didn’t sneak. That was rich. “Whatever you say, Loki.”

Another of Gullinkambi’s crows echoed in the distance as Loki lifted a brow, unimpressed. “Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?”

“He rolled toward her without warning. The air hitched in her throat, and she immediately fell back into the bed, allowed him to cage her in with his arms, body settling on top of hers with an ease borne of a lifetime of muscle memory. Propped up on his elbows, he gazed down at her with borderline exasperation.

“You talk too much.”

She flashed a teasing grin. “Well, someone has to make up for all the talking you don’t do.”

In typical Loki fashion, he ignored her in favor of burying his face in the crook of her neck. His lips pressed lightly to the hollow above her collarbone, warm exhale ghosting over her skin, and she couldn’t stop the shiver that skittered down her spine. When was the last time they’d been in this position? Had it really been twelve years since that pivotal day atop the cliffs of Stora Karlsö? Jane buried her hands in his hair and sighed. So many mistakes, so much lost time.

Nudging her legs further apart, Loki shifted to the point she could feel every inch of his body through the thin dressing gown now rucked up around her thighs. She arched into him, unbidden, and one of his hands slipped beneath her back to press her impossibly closer as he all but growled into her neck. It was a greedy, primal sound that stirred a heady sensation low in her belly, called
some long-dormant thing to life.

“I’d almost forgotten how you felt.” Loki scraped his teeth along her jaw, mumbling broken, indistinct phrases against her skin like a prayer.

Beneath him, Jane shivered again. Her mouth chased after his in a silent plea even as he withdrew to remain just out of reach. “Loki…”

He traced the shell of her ear in response and reached between them to compulsively palm her breast. An odd keening noise dimly registered in the back of her mind, and it took a second to realize it had come from her. Not that it mattered, of course. She was too preoccupied with remembering the way he felt. Her fingers flitted up his back, over his shoulders, down his chest… and she’d just skimmed the waistband of his trousers when a knock came from the door.

Reality crashed back into place, and Jane reluctantly released the ties to throw her head back into the pillow. Sometimes it felt like the world truly was against them. Loki, however, was not quite so ready to give up. Cupping her face with one hand, he captured her lips in a searing kiss that sent her thoughts reeling.

“My lord?” Another knock echoed throughout the chamber. “Are you in there?”

Loki pulled away just enough to call out a muffled later before resuming his ministrations. For all her penchant towards propriety, Jane was inclined to agree. Her body literally ached with the need to finish what they’d started. Winding her arms around his neck, she deepened the kiss, looped her legs around his hips to pull him closer, groaned when he pressed against her.

“But my lord, the war council is to begin shortly. Your attendance is required as a condition of the terms agreed upon by—”

“I know the terms!” Jane flinched at the snarl he hurled towards the door, and he absentmindedly stroked her cheek before continuing in a voice that, while softer, held no less irritation. “I was there when the All-Father so clearly laid them out.”

It was the first indication of what had detained him the previous evening. Fandral and Hogun had arrived shortly after his release, one to take Loki to the throne room, the other to guide her back to her chambers with strict orders to remain there until the following morning. Worried, she’d repeatedly paced the length of the room. She’d even briefly considered marching down to the throne room herself to make sure Odin’s agreement hadn’t only been a ploy. In the end, though, she’d stayed put. The only thing worse than being double-crossed would be for her intrusion to jeopardize an arrangement that had been so hard-won.

“Forgive me, my lord, but I was sent to escort you to Staðr Ófriðr. As a captain in His Majesty’s army, I cannot disrega—”

Loki was up and moving before the Einherjar could finish. Ducking beneath the covers, Jane held her breath as the door was yanked open. There was a lengthy silence punctuated only by the Einherjar’s awkward shuffling, pinned as he most likely was beneath Loki’s glare.

“You’re awfully young to be a captain. Is the Realm Eternal so lacking that they are promoting children now?”

“I am nearly eleven hundred, my lord. I’ve spent most of my life training to be part of the royal army. By the time I was eight hundred, I was top of my regiment in all measures of battle.”

“Top of your regiment? How impressive.” Jane cringed at the sarcasm practically dripping from the
words. “Is that why you were chosen to run errands?”

“The All-Father himself ordered me to retrieve you.”

The amount of pride the Einherjar managed to scrounge up and instill in only those few words was remarkable. For someone so old, he was endearingly naïve. Poor guy. It was a shame, really, that he’d been sent to fetch Loki, of all people.

“What an honor. And what will you do if I choose not to go? Force me? I’ve been sitting in on war councils since before you were born and am perfectly capable of getting to Staðr Ófriðr myself. If I wanted to escape, I would have done so already. Your presence does nothing. Run along now and tell the All-Father I’ll be there shortly. Go on, Captain.”

The door thudding shut was followed by the quiet sound of approaching footsteps, then the mattress dipped slightly. Jane didn’t move, though, just stared up at sheets dappled by the early morning light until they were slowly pulled down and tossed aside. Brushing the hair out of her face, she turned to find Loki seated on the edge of the bed.

“That was kind of harsh. He was just following orders.”

Loki shrugged. “Several of the Einherjar were quite fond of mocking me during my time in the dungeons. They’re very bold when there’s no risk involved.”

“And he was one of them?”

“Whether he was or not is of no consequence. A reminder of who exactly they’re dealing with would serve them all well.” He wrapped one hand lightly around her ankle. “Considering what he interrupted, I thought I was rather magnanimous.”

“Of course you would.” The corners of her mouth quirked as she tucked one arm beneath her head. It was amazing how easily they slipped back into old habits. “You know you could have just woken me last night. I wouldn’t have minded.” Still craving a resolution from their short-lived rendezvous, she almost wished he had.

“This was enough.” The hand on her ankle slid purposefully up her calf. “For now.”

Jane’s eyes darted away to follow the progression of Loki’s hand with a sort of detached fascination. It was unnecessarily and ridiculously distracting. So much so that she well near hauled him to her to make good on that promise, stray thoughts like to hell with later and need you now jangling around in time to her thundering heartbeat. But then logic reared its sensible – albeit completely unwanted – head to remind her of the danger threatening the rest of the realms and that they were late to a meeting assembled to discuss how to deal with it.

“Yeah, I…” Not knowing what else to say, she repeated lamely. “Yeah.” Then she sat up, more than a little disappointed. “We should probably go.”

“If we must.”

“You’re a disgraced prince, and I’m the outsider who coerced Odin into releasing you. We’re not exactly the most-liked people in Asgard right now. It’s probably best if we at least make an effort to cooperate.” Her ankle slipped free of his hand as she scooted to sit beside him. “Plus, I don’t want you to end up back in the dungeons because you killed the next person sent to get us.”

Loki sniffed. “Don’t be dramatic, Jane.”
“Seriously maim, then.”

With a slight smile, she watched him stand and cross to the bookshelves. The skin on his back was smooth, wiry muscles gliding over each other every time he moved, but it hadn’t always been that way. In the depths of Munnr Død, she’d seen it blister, blacken, and melt away. In the Realm Between Realms, he’d been tortured again and again and again. And yet, there was no sign of the cruelties he’d experienced. What else had he suffered over the years that she didn’t know about? How much more would he endure before all was said and done?

“I’m going to go change real quick.” Doing her best to ignore the inherent urge to touch him, Jane stood as well. “I’ll be back in—”

Loki casually waved a hand without even looking, and her dressing gown shimmered into an elegant one-shouldered number. A deep shade of sangria, the flowing material was drawn in at her waist by a belt studded with black opals and pooled at her feet like spilled wine. There was a distinctly Grecian feel to it that she liked.

The telltale whisper of magic was still dancing across her skin as she fingered one of the gemstones. “I forgot how convenient that was.”

It was the sound of him returning that finally drew her attention from the gown. They were both fully dressed now, armed and ready to take on the lion’s den that would undoubtedly be the council meeting, but Jane took a moment to study Loki. Really look at him. Their transcendence of time never failed to amaze her. Every single one of his features remained the same, same as hers. Of course there were minor changes – his hair was longer, face leaner, armor slightly modified – but nothing truly notable. Pluck them from the here and now and place them in a razed village and she wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

And yet, if she looked close enough, there was something different. A darkness, perhaps. A sense of gravity in the depths of his eyes that hadn’t been there before. A solemnness that was so at-odds with the God of Mischief she’d first met. She reached up to Loki’s face almost reverently, fingers trembling as they ghosted down his cheek. That was the difference between them and the Einherjar who’d come to retrieve them. What mattered wasn’t the number of years lived but the things seen. The Einherjar hadn’t seen enough to truly grow up yet, didn’t have that jaded edge that came with the burden of experience. They did.

When her fingers found the sharp line of his jaw, he turned into her touch. His lips brushed her fingertips, exhale warm over her knuckles, then he caught her hand in his. “Come, Jane. It’s time to go.” With what seemed to be considerable effort, he lowered her hand before settling his own at the small of her back, steering her towards the door. “You can admire me later.”

Jane jerked. “Admire? I wasn’t—” She turned to Loki incredulously and, seeing his hint of a smirk, contemplated whacking him over the head with the nearest object she could find.

Decidedly oblivious to her irritation, he opened the door, gave a short bow, and swept out an arm with flourish. “After you, my lady.”

She pulled a face as she passed him. “You’re so full of yourself it’s embarrassing.” But the insult was a hollow one, and she couldn’t quite prevent a quiet chuckle from bubbling up as they made their way down the hall.
Located in one of the topmost towers of the palace, Staðr Ófriðr roughly translated to place of war, which made sense once they arrived.

A massive table centered the room, the top of which had been carved into a topographical likeness of Asgard. Countless maps of the eight remaining realms adorned the walls. Most were indistinguishable, but a series of blue and white ones that could only be Jötunheim and the fiery ones of Muspelheim stood out. There were all manner of weapons, too, interspersed between the maps. Long bows complete with quivers full of arrows, battle axes, shields, metal-tipped quarterstaffs and spears, swords of various length, daggers… there was even the occasional atgeir and sæx, items rarely seen since her days in ancient Norway. Directly opposite the entrance was a single horned helmet, the right side of which was still mangled and scorched from a long-ago battle.

“Ah, the mystery of Lady Jane’s disappearance is resolved!”

“Loki’s delay, as well.” Jane much preferred Fandral’s enthusiastic greeting to Freyja’s cool, haughty one. “The dungeons must have indeed been lonely if it couldn’t wait until after the meeting.”

Try as she might, heat burned through her cheeks at the insinuation. The fact that they’d been in the process of doing exactly that made it even worse. She refused to duck her head or look away or even squirm beneath the goddess’ gaze, though. Any sign of weakness would get her nowhere among these people who already considered her inferior. Instead, she grounded herself best she could, gritting her teeth and lifting her chin.

Freyja merely smiled. “No need to worry, dear. This isn’t the first time Loki’s been late because of a bit of fun.”

“Don’t you have some poor, innocent boy to corrupt, Freyja?” Beside her, Loki seemed unfazed. “Or is your husband in Asgard? Not that that’s stopped you before.”

“How dare you—”

A bearded man stepped forward from a small group. “You go too far, Loki.”

“Oh, there you are, Óðr. Good to see you again. Would you like to hear of your wife’s more illustrious activities? The dungeons may be lonely, but they are a hotbed of gossip.”

“Enough!” Odin’s voice boomed throughout the room as he strode through the entrance, putting an immediate end to all other talking. “You were not summoned here so I could listen to you bicker like children. Now sit. Let us begin. Too much time has been already wasted.”

As one, everyone approached the chairs rounding the table, and Jane followed Loki towards an empty pair on the right side. Concealed by the noise of movement, she tiptoed to whisper in his ear. “Can you at least try not to instigate anything?” However, before he could respond, the All-Father blocked their path.

Loki came to such a sudden stop that she ran into him, nose jamming painfully into his shoulder blade. Miffed, she rubbed away the wetness that had sprung to her eyes as the entire room seemed to hold its collective breath. For one long moment, they simply stood there, wordlessly gauging one another. Two thousand years’ worth of betrayal, lies, and grief hung in the air between them like a tangible thing. And just when it seemed the tension couldn’t get any worse, Loki smiled.

“Father.”
Half-hidden behind him, Jane cringed.

That wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind.

Why did she even bother?

Steeling for an admonishment of some kind, she was surprised when they received nothing more than a narrowed glare before Odin whirled on his heel to take his place at the head of the table. Loki followed suit, pulling out the chair beside a dark-skinned woman. When he motioned to the only vacant one left expectantly, she shot him a deadpan look as she took the seat.

“There is little need for pretense. Everyone here is aware of the danger we face. Thanos has returned.” No one moved, but Odin’s declaration caused a noticeable shift in the atmosphere. “In the short time since he’s revealed himself, he has attacked Midgard, Alfheim, and Asgard. He has killed countless, among those the noble ljósálfar families and my wife, your queen. In doing so, he has declared war on the Realm Eternal.”

“Forgive me, but was Thanos not banished long ago?” Volstagg leaned forward. “Even if he were to have somehow survived, the Void is inescapable. Are we certain these attacks were not done by the jötnar?”

A blonde woman wearing lightweight armor and the armguards of an archer nodded. “Their grudges last longer than their memories, and they’ve many reasons to seek revenge.”

“Heimdall has verified that the jötnar remain in Jötunheim. This is Thanos’ doing.” At the opposite end of the table, Thor tapped lightly on the table. “And the Void is not inescapable. If it were, Loki would not be here to aid us today.”

“Is that what he’s doing?”

“Last time he was free, he waged war on Midgard.”

“He tried to destroy Jötunheim before that.”

“And between those two he kept me alive.” For all its softness, Jane’s voice carried, and she locked eyes with each of the objectors in turn. “He’s the only reason I survived my time in Jötunheim. He’s the only reason I’ve survived a lot of things.”

The man next to her shrugged. “What man is immune to the suffering of women?”

“It wasn’t—”

“All-Father, he partnered with Thanos.” Another woman smoothly cut her off. Hair, clothes, eyes rimmed in kohl, painted stripes down her cheeks, rune stones clicking together in one hand… aside from her porcelain skin, everything about her was dark. Tuck her away into the shadows, and she’d disappear. “Surely you don’t think this wise?”

Again, it was Thor who came to the defense. “Loki’s collusion with Thanos was out of necessity. He did so with the intention of betraying him at the opportune moment. Had he not, he’d likely still be the titan’s prisoner.”

“Better to remain his prisoner than aid in his domination.”

Óðr scoffed. “Yes, how convenient that the opportune moment came after thousands of mortals died. I’m sure he felt great remorse.”
“He laid the groundwork for the betrayal from the start. When the time came for him to act, he was prevented from doing so by one of my comrades.” There wasn’t as much vehemence in Thor’s tone as there might have once been, but his refutations were appreciated nonetheless. “We were unaware of his ruse at the time. We cannot fault him for that.”

“Neither should he be rewarded.”

“He should have made his intentions known.”

“We’re proceeding with only his word that was his plan?”

Thor gestured to her. “Jane has also corroborated the story.”

“Oh, well, if the Midgardian swears to it…”

More and more voices joined the fray until the room was an indistinguishable mess of insults and slurs. Every snide comment was dripping with suspicion, steeped in bigotry, an abuse to Loki’s very character. Not that some of them weren’t true, but still… brows drawn together, she glanced up to the God of Mischief sitting stonily beside her. With his expression carefully blank, there was nothing to give away his feelings on what was happening. To everyone else, he just looked like he thought himself above it all.

But Jane wasn’t everyone else. There was a slight clenching of his jaw that, to her, spoke louder than words. Loki was bothered by the comments, he just refused to take part in it. The conversation faded into the background as she lowered her head and stared unseeingly at the miniature valley hewn into the tabletop in front of her. Why wouldn’t he defend himself? Was it pride? Arrogance?

Then she realized… it didn’t matter. Whatever he might say wouldn’t make a difference, so he refused to say anything. The Asgardians with all their unshakeable prejudices would never believe or accept him. To them, he was an outsider. He would never belong. Just like her. Beneath the table, she laid a hand on his knee. The two of them. It would only ever be the two of them.

Odin was the one to finally continue the meeting. “Loki has valuable insight from his dealings with the titan. That is why he’s here. Should his word prove false, he will answer to me.” It wasn’t enough to fully pacify those in attendance, but no one dared argue with the king. “Now…” He motioned to Thor. “The situation, as it stands.”

“For the time being, Thanos and his Chitauri army remain in the Void. However, the Convergence draws near.” Jane followed Thor’s brief glance to find nine spheres hovering overhead. Meant to be a representation of the realms, they were scattered in a circular pattern, but she could see how they were beginning to align. “He has already used the weakening boundaries to attack Alfheim and steal both the Space and Mind Stone. We believe he will lead his final assault on Asgard when the Convergence is at its peak.”

Across the table, Hogun frowned. “That’s less than a fortnight.”

“Then we’ll have to move quickly.”

“If he possesses the Space Stone, he could attack at any time.” Sif absentmindedly traced the peaks of a mountain range on the table. “Why should we assume he’ll wait?”

“Because Thanos is nothing if not dramatic.” All eyes darted to Loki. It was the first time he’d said something neither sarcastic nor confrontational since arriving. “He believes his fate is, in some way, tied to every Convergence that has occurred since his birth. He will not make his move until the current one is in full swing.”
“It’s too convenient.” Shaking his head, the man beside her leaned back and crossed his arms. “No warrior can be predictable if he hopes to succeed.”

Freyja huffed a laugh. “Speak for yourself. My enemies know exactly what they will face, and they die anyway.”

“If he goes into battle believing he’s already won, his vanity could be our ally.”

“He was defeated before. Can we not do it again?”

A woman to Freyja’s right tossed a wavy mass of auburn hair over one shoulder. “Back then he did not have two stones and an army at his disposal.”

“So we call our banners.” Freyr casually adjusted his tunic. Of everyone in the room, he appeared the least disturbed, which made perfect sense. Jane would expect the God of Fair Weather to be easygoing even when discussing war. “The Vanir will come, as will the remaining ljósálfar. Týr, you recently travelled to Niðavellir. Would the dvergar stand with us as well?”

The man beside her – Týr, her mind corrected – canted his head to one side. “I believe so.”

“There you have it. Asgard has faced worse odds and prevailed.”

“Indeed, we might have stood a chance…” Loki’s mouth twisted. “If those were the only two stones he possessed.”

That seemed to bring everyone up short, and the sudden silence that fell over the room carried a noise all its own. Even Odin sat a little straighter in his chair, a kind of awful trepidation marring his features. “Explain.”

“Thanos spent his time in exile seeking the Infinity Stones. He is now in possession of all but one, along with the lost Infinity Gauntlet.” The silence immediately gave way to a chorus of uneasy murmuring. “I also believe he will align himself with Surtur, if he has not done so already.” At that, the room broke out into chaos.

“Five?”

“That’s impossible!”

“—stones haven’t been united since—”

“—heard Surtur has been dormant for thousands of—”

“—completes the Gauntlet, we’ll—”

“—can only be the prophecy of Ragnarök—”

“—how can Asgard hope to stand against the—”

As disconcerting as their discussion of war had been, the underlying current of dread now snaking around the room was even more so. Panic like that was a disease, and an infectious one at that. It bled from person to person, feeding off itself until it morphed into something terrible. Jane had witnessed it too many times over the years not to recognize it now. Amidst the commotion, she felt herself sink into the past, could almost hear the jeering crowd clamoring for blood, smell the burning citizens of Strasbourg.

Odin banged his scepter in an attempt to bring the meeting back to order while Jane, shaking free of
the memories, turned to Loki. “Stones? Gauntlet?” She’d spent a good deal of the conversation confused, but the universal reaction to his news made her increasingly apprehensive.

“Perhaps we need a history lesson.” As the noise gradually died down, Týr caught the All-Father’s attention. “For those among us who are less informed.”

“Jane Foster.” She jerked at the sound of her name and looked past Loki to Odin at the head of the table. “Have you heard of the Infinity Stones?”

“Um…” Being the focus of every eye in the room was incredibly unnerving. “No.” She suddenly felt like she was back at the University of Zurich, attending college for the very first time, being called out in front of the whole class during her first lecture. “Should I have?”

“I would’ve expected so, what with you having worked so closely with one of them.”

In the face of such scrutiny, Jane did her best to maintain some sense of composure even as her brows furrowed. “What?”

“There are relics that pre-date the universe itself. In the early years, Cosmic Entities scoured the Void for singularities and formed them into what we now call Infinity Stones.” Odin began to circle the table. “There are six in all: reality, space, power, mind, soul, and time. Ancient forces of destruction, they were once used to mow down entire civilizations like wheat in a field.”

Something was missing if she was supposed to have derived an answer from that little speech.

“You knew them as the Tesseract and Loki’s scepter.” It was Thor who came to her rescue, having read her lost expression. “They were, in fact, Infinity Stones. The Space and Mind Stones, to be precise.”

“It was through great effort and loss that the stones were eventually separated and scattered across the expanse of Yggdrasil. Each individual one has the ability to wreak havoc on the realms, but bring them all together…” Odin shook his head. “He who wields a completed Infinity Gauntlet would be virtually invincible.”

At last, understanding. Or at least the beginnings of it. Jane worried her lip. “So now Thanos has five stones and the Gauntlet.”

“And apparently a new ally, which begs the question…” On the opposite side of the table, Odin stopped his slow circling to fix Loki with a searching look. “Why do you believe the sons of Muspel would ally themselves when they’ve never done so before?”

“A personal vendetta. Surtur lost something of great value long ago. When Thanos learned of the theft, he realized the potential at stake. He spoke of the advantages such a partnership would provide on more than one occasion. No doubt he offered Surtur a chance to reclaim his stolen property in return for aid.”

Jane had been staring blankly at Asgard’s sprawling landscape trying to wrap her mind around the vastness of everything she’d recently learned. But as Loki’s comments slowly filtered through, something pricked uncomfortably at her thoughts and she fell impossibly still. Something of great value. Stolen property. Rolling hills blurred into focus with a single blink, then the sharp lines of Loki’s profile when she faced him.

“Muspelheim has long since faded from glory.” The redhead woman wrinkled her nose in distaste. “What could Surtur have possessed that was of any value?”
Waving a hand dismissively, Volstagg scratched at his beard with the other. “If it’s gone, it matters little. A better question would be why Heimdall hasn’t seen any of this.”

“The sons of Muspel are skilled in magic. Not as skilled as some…” Freyja lifted her chin, and Jane was distinctly reminded of a preening bird. “But they are more than capable of hiding their actions if they wish. With the Infinity Stones at his disposal, I imagine Thanos would be the same.”

“So there are two armies devising an attack on Asgard, and we can’t anticipate either of their movements. Fantastic. This is beginning to feel less like a war council and more like death arrangements.”

Fandral clapped a hand on Óðr’s back. “Cheer up, my friend. We’re going to have a firsthand experience to the end of the realms. The very fires of Ragnarök will light your pyre.”

“Why don’t you shut—”

“All-Father, you know we will stand with you.” On the other side of Loki, the dark-skinned woman spoke beseechingly. “But we cannot fight an enemy we cannot locate.”

“Thanos could be in Asgard right now, and we’d never even know it.”

“How many lives must we sacrifice?”

“As many as are needed!” The room flinched as one when Odin slammed the butt of his scepter against the floor so hard the stone cracked. “Have I summoned warriors or babes? Will you hide behind your mothers’ skirts when Thanos invades? If Ragnarök is upon us, so be it, but the Realm Eternal will neither cower nor bow down. We will face this challenge as we’ve faced all others. We will fight until the last Asgardian breath, until the last drop of blood is shed.”

Effervescent sunlight poured through the windows in a stark contrast to the stifling silence that now settled over the group. It was thick and humbling. Jane chanced a glance around the table. Aside from Thor and Loki, everyone’s focus had landed somewhere other than the All-Father. There was nothing like being chastised by a king.

Thor sighed, finger and thumb pressed to his temples. “I understand all of your reservations, and while the odds may seem stacked against us, we are not without hope.” Their eyes briefly met for the first time since she’d arrived. “Jane has developed machines that can track the Convergence. They’ll be able to tell us when and where the portals will appear.”

“So you are useful.” Freyja arched a brow. “I was beginning to wonder how you managed to bring about Loki’s release.”

Utterly fed up with being talked down to, Jane smiled thinly. “Yes, well, not everyone has to resort to baring skin to get what they want. Some of us get by on actual skills.”

Freyr let loose a barking laugh. “I told you she was spirited.” Seeing the goddess’ eyes narrow dangerously, he reached out to pat her hand. “Come now, sister, did you think she would not bite back?”

“The point…” Thor raised his voice to head off another possible confrontation. “Is that we may not be able to predict Thanos’ movements, but we can predict where he will stage his attack.”

“At least we’ll not be blindsided.”

“How soon will we know the location?”
The speaker, a man down the table who had been silent up to this point, had a unique voice. It was quiet, but not so much in volume as in the makeup of it. Listening to him was like hearing the anticipatory stillness of a forest snowfall or the hollow spaces between heartbeats. In his voice was the immeasurable weight of a promise.

“Well, I’ll need to reconfigure the phase meter’s parameters to be compatible with the magnetic fields in Asgard’s atmosphere, otherwise it won’t be able to read the local disturbances. It probably wouldn’t hurt to recalibrate the magnetometer too. Tracking deep space anomalies would be more for informational purposes at this point, but there’s always the possibility it could help. I’ll also have to do some research on any differences there might be in the particle data between—” When Thor cleared his throat, Jane cut off abruptly. “I should know a few days after I get my equipment.”

Týr nodded. “Plenty of time to prepare.”

“You speak as if passivity is our only option.” The woman in the dark clothes twirled the rune stones around in her hand. “Should we not plan a preemptive strike as well?”

“Into the Void?” With a derisive snort, Loki gestured out one of the windows. “After you.”

Sif frowned. “You said yourself that Muspelheim is most likely involved. I stand with Herja on this. If we move now, we could head off at least one of the parties.”

“Do so and you’ll be walking into a trap.”

“Loki’s right.” Several people turned to Thor with varying degrees of surprise at the continued defense of his brother. Earlier, it could’ve been chalked up to diplomacy, keeping the peace for the greater good, but this was outright support. “We’d be fools to think Thanos has not already prepared for such a move. Without knowing what pathways have been opened between the realms, we put ourselves at risk.”

“We put ourselves at risk regardless.”

Herja crossed her arms and sat back in the chair. She clearly didn’t agree but seemed unwilling to speak out against the crown prince any more than she already had. Instead, it was Freyr who attempted to smooth over the somewhat awkward impasse.

“We defer to your judgment, All-Father. What would you have us do?”

Chin propped in one hand, Odin studied the carved terrain while Jane surreptitiously watched his single eye flit from mountains to forests to plains. Mythology claimed that, in his endless quest for wisdom, he’d journeyed down among the roots of the World’s Tree to Mímir’s Well. There, he’d willingly gouged out his eye in exchange for a drink of water said to impart cosmic knowledge. However, that story, like so many others, was false. Odin was far from omniscient. Whatever wisdom he had most likely came from thousands upon thousands of years of ruling, and the battered helmet displayed on the wall behind him hinted at a more conventional loss of his eye.

Seconds dragged on into minutes before the All-Father finally stood. “If we are to defeat Thanos and Surtur, we will have to be fully prepared. There can be no surprises. As such, we will wage war here. In Asgard. On our own soil. No one knows the Realm Eternal better than we.”

Jane nodded absently. “Home field advantage.” Ignoring the strange looks her offhand comment received, she spoke up. “When will I be able to get my stuff?”

“Immediately. The sooner we pinpoint the location, the better.” Odin’s attention shifted across the table. “Freyr, you will gather the ljósálfar. Let Óðr deal with Vanaheim. Once they have returned,
Týr will go to Niðavellir to speak with the dwarves.” After a brief pause, he added. “Sif, you will accompany him. The dvergar have always been partial to you. Bring them into the fold by whatever means necessary. Will the Valkyries be ready?"

The woman wearing the archer’s armor flashed a wicked grin. “We are always ready.”

“You three…” Odin glanced to each of the Warriors Three in turn. “Will review our stores in the armory and see that the Einherjar have everything they need. Something will also need to be done about the city’s defenses.”

Even though Thor was probably partially responsible for overseeing everyone else’s actions, he was the first to volunteer. “I’ll speak with Heimdall.”

“Very good. And Víðarr…” The quiet man with the strange voice lifted his head. “A word when we’re through here.”

“This is all well and good, but what if Thanos manages to complete the Gauntlet? Our margin for victory is already slim.”

“He won’t.” The image of nonchalance, Loki fiddled with his surcoat, adjusting the collar, smoothing the edges that draped down his chest. “The Soul Stone hasn’t been seen or heard of in nearly a thousand years.”

Óðr shot him a withering look. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I listen. There are no secrets in the dark corners of the realms.”

“And we’re to just take your word for this.”

“Do you have a choice?”

“Obviously not or you wouldn’t be here. How do we know we can even trust you?”

“You don’t.”

Jane nearly sighed. Tensions had been high since the meeting began. Everyone was understandably skeptical of Loki’s presence, much less his involvement at such a critical time. But Óðr seemed to have a particular hatred for the God of Mischief, one that Loki clearly enjoyed exacerbating if his wide, almost playful smile was any indication.

“Peace, Óðr.” When the man prepared to object, Odin lifted a hand. “Trust cannot be renewed unless opportunities are given. Loki and I spoke at length after his release, and I’ve seen fit to include him in these matters. His word is good enough for your king. So, too, should it be for you.”

He scanned the remaining individuals. “You have all been given a task, now see to them.”

There was a split-second where Jane wondered if Óðr would continue to argue despite Odin’s order to stand down – the furious scowl on his face didn’t exactly bode well – but the moment was lost as everyone began to stand up. He was the first to leave the room, though, storming out in a whirl of sapphire and silver brocade.

Others gradually followed suit, and as the company dwindled, Jane felt at ease enough to stretch. She hadn’t realized the full extent of her anxiousness until it had been replaced by relief that they’d made it through the meeting relatively unscathed. Rolling the tightness from her shoulders, she watched Sif and Thor discuss something in low tones before the view was blocked by sculpted dark red armor.
“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced.”

Jane blinked and refocused on Týr. The studded leather gave way to long brown hair that was pulled back and fastened low at his neck, a well-trimmed beard, and kind, hazel eyes that glinted from within a deeply tanned face. It made for a surprising picture. Exchange the armor for robes and he’d pass for a westernized version of Jesus. Not exactly what she would’ve imagined from the God of Law and Heroic Glory.

Distracted by something over her shoulder, Loki offered a perfunctory introduction. “Jane, this is Lord Týr, our resident diplomat.”

“And wartime strategist.” Týr gave a shallow bow and extended a hand, and she dutifully placed her own in his. “A pleasure.”

When he pressed his lips to her knuckles, she was thankful to find there was none of Freyr’s lechery in the act. It was simply the proper thing to do, and manners from a time long past kicked in automatically. “The pleasure is mine.” Then she undid any graceful first impression she might have made by looking at the calloused hand holding hers, then the other one resting on the pommel of his sword, before blurting out the most inane thing humanly possible. “You have both hands.”

Týr’s brows drew together in confusion.

Even Loki spared a moment to look at her strangely.

Meanwhile, Jane wished for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

“So sorry, I mean of course you’d have both hands! Why wouldn’t you?” She chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of her neck and willing away the flush that burned her cheeks. Stupid Prose Edda with its stupid stories. The giant wolf, Fenrir, didn’t exist. Therefore, there was no need for Týr to have sacrificed his hand to bind him. Therefore, she sounded like an idiot. Humiliated, she hastily changed the subject. “So you’re a strategist… anything particular in mind for the battle?”

“I’ve some ideas, but nothing concrete until the site has been located. Thor spoke highly of you and your machines after his return from exile. I look forward to seeing what they’re capable of.”

“I hope they don’t disappoint.” Jane smiled when Týr bowed once more in farewell, but behind his retreating back, she cast a sharp look to Loki, who was already giving her a sidelong glance riddled with thinly-veiled amusement. “Don’t ask.”

He snorted. “I wouldn’t know where to start even if I wanted to.”

Deigning not to acknowledge the comment, she swallowed an embarrassed groan and spun away towards the closest window. The castle town lay far below, so far that she couldn’t make out the people she knew must have been walking the streets and markets, but the rooftops glittered in the midmorning light. Birds with long tail feathers streaming behind them coasted through the air in between.

Her fingers trailed along the ledge as she moved past the window. There, nestled amongst a display of battle axes and shields, were five maps of Jötunheim illustrated in exceptional detail. At the center was the jötnar’s stronghold, an imposing blue and black structure made entirely of ice. North of that was a seemingly endless stretch of razor-sharp rocks that looked like they’d erupted violently from the ground, while to the south lay a derelict city on the edge of a vast, frozen sea. There was a cleared area directly west of the stronghold with only a single archway leading underground. Two massive stalactites bordered the entrance not unlike a snake’s fangs. An involuntary shiver rippled
through Jane at the memory of Munr Død, and she shifted to the right, focus drifting to the east, up and over the jagged spires of Sōngr Fjøll, down the windward side of the mountains to the lowlands, all the way to the brink of Grōf Miðli, the Void.

It seemed like so long ago.

Had it really only been a couple years?

“There are times I’d go back to that cave.” She sensed more than felt Loki’s presence at her back, discerning her thoughts in a way only he could. “Much has happened since then.”

So much.

Too much.

And her heart ached with how cruel the years had been.

“Jane?” Jolting slightly, she turned to the approaching Thor who had just finished up his conversation with Sif. The close proximity had her shoulder bumping against Loki’s sternum, but he didn’t give her space, just hovered at her side. It was an almost possessive act, one that didn’t go unnoticed if the way Thor’s eyes flicked to the point their bodies touched was any indication. “Are you ready?”

She stared at him dumbly. “Ready?”

“To go to Midgard.”

“Oh, right!” Too many people were already waiting on her. “Yes, just let me—”

Before she could take more than a few steps, Loki’s hand wrapped around her wrist and jerked her to a stop. She looked back in surprise, and while his grip did lessen, his focus remained solely on Thor. “I’ll take her.”

The sudden strain in the atmosphere was palpable. It had sharpened into something steely, and she distantly wondered if they would strike against it like flint. However, Thor had changed drastically since Puente Antiguo. Instead of rising to the challenge as he once might have, he remained calm, choosing his words carefully.

“The All-Father wants Jane to travel by way of the Bi-Frost. It’s… safer.”

Loki scoffed, undeterred. “You mean more easily traceable.”

“It is safer. There are too many weak spots between the realms. The Bi-Frost provides a measure of protection your pathways do not. It’ll be simpler, too, with all her machines.” Thor glanced her way. “You will be bringing more than one, I assume?” Satisfied with her mute nod, he crossed his arms and looked back to Loki as if to say *there you have it*.

“Everyone has a task but me. I’m hurt.” Loki released her arm to place a hand mockingly on his chest. “You’d think Father had something against me.”

“If you’re that eager to help, you can aid me with the city’s defenses.”

For one fleeting second, Jane thought that would be the end of it – that Thor would ignore the snide remark and Loki would accept the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than himself and they would both find some small measure of reconciliation – but it was a foolish notion in hindsight and
whatever naïve longings she might have had vanished in an instant when Loki’s mouth twisted in a harsh sneer, voice low and taunting.

“There are *others* who wouldn’t have objected to my involvement.”

Thor stiffened, knuckles whitening around Mjölnir. “Perhaps, but they’re not here to speak on your behalf.”

An unmistakable sense of dread settled in the pit of Jane’s stomach, and she stepped back as Loki bit out a grating shade of a laugh. “Son of Odin.”

“No, not just of Odin.” Thor advanced, filling the space she’d just vacated. “You think it was you alone who loved Mother? You had her tricks, but I had her trust.”

“Trust?” Every trace of the cynical teasing was gone from Loki’s features in an instant. Left in its place was a terrible sort of malice. “Was that her last expression? Trust? When you let her *die.*”

“What good were you in your cell?”

“Who put me there?” Loki was yelling now. The words resonated in the empty council room, fueled by the toxic combination of Thor’s anger and his own bitter hurt. “Who put me there?”

Without warning, Thor reached out and caught Loki’s shoulder. “You know damn well!” They grappled with each other while Jane looked on helplessly. Loki may have been more agile, but it was Thor who eventually gained the upper hand, used his brute strength to shove Loki against the wall. “You know damn well who!” Knives clattered to the floor, disturbed by the impact, as he raised Mjölnir threateningly.

Jane jerked and took one faltering step forward. “Thor—”

And maybe it was the veins of fear in her voice or a lingering trace of affection for her or nothing more than his own unfailingly good morals… whatever it was made Thor pause. He cocked his head slightly in her direction, even if he didn’t meet her eyes, before slowly pulling back, Mjölnir lowering to his side once more.

“She wouldn’t want us to fight.”

Still braced against the wall, Loki arched a brow. “Well, she wouldn’t exactly be shocked.”

The currents in the air changed shape. They eased somewhat, tempering as the prickly edges of animosity bled away, although a touch of melancholy remained. Thor and Loki continued to regard each other, but both their lips twitched with… it wasn’t quite happiness, more like the memory of it, and Jane was suddenly reminded that she was not the only one to have shared a lifetime with the God of Mischief.

Thor sighed. He looked so drawn and weary, like the full weight of their lost past had come crashing down onto him all at once. “I wish I could trust you.”

A bank of clouds rolled across the sun, causing the room to darken, and Loki straightened. His face was thrown into shadow, mouth set in a resolute line, black-sky gaze hard and fierce and ominous.

“Trust my rage.”

It was a promise.
The only one he could give.

And Jane – quietly watching the exchange from the sidelines, watching the brothers struggle to find the island in a sea of broken trust, watching them try and lay the past to rest – thought that was perhaps the most truthful thing she’d ever heard Loki say.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter gave us a glimpse at characters who will be showing up throughout this last arc. Oðr is Freyja’s husband and was briefly referred to in Chapter 22 – Interlude: Loki, although not by name. Víðarr is known as the god of vengeance. Mythology states him to be one of Odin’s sons, although that’s not what we’re going with here. He is often referred to as “the silent god”. Týr was first mentioned a couple chapters back, but just as a reminder, he is the god of law and heroic glory who, in the myths, sacrificed his hand in order to bind Fenrir, a giant wolf that plays a part in Ragnarök. The various women at the council aside from Jane, Sif, and Freyja were Valkyries. I have a deep love for these badass warrior women, so they’ll get plenty of action in the coming chapters, along with proper introductions.

Come follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, items of inspiration that can hint at where this story is going in the long run... you know you want to.
Hello, all you lovely readers! I’m still alive and have made it my personal goal to finish this fic this year! I’m still dabbling around in other fandoms, but I promise to set aside more time for this. It’s the least you deserve for being so patient with me all these years <3

Also, I’ll be going back through the entire fic after this chapter to do some slight editing. No changes to the storyline, it’ll be more of updating past chapters to match my current writing style. That way everything will feel more cohesive in the end. I’m picky that way.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“We all have one foot in a fairytale and the other in the abyss.”

In the end, Thor and Loki compromised.

S.H.I.E.L.D. had revamped their security protocols in the wake of the Battle of New York, and even though Jane was pretty much free to come and go at will with her work, she was still under surveillance enough to be wary. Until they knew the situation they’d be walking into, stealth seemed the best option. Therefore, they agreed that Loki would take Jane. If anything went south, he could either hide them from unwanted eyes or bring them back to the safety of the Realm Eternal. Thor’s only stipulation was that Loki not hide their movements from Heimdall.

Simple enough, even if she’d expected a bit more resistance.

Fluttering wings drew Jane’s attention, and she watched what seemed to be an abnormally large butterfly dart around the flowering bushes that lined one of Asgard’s many courtyards. Behind her, Loki stood silent and still, feeling along Yggdrasil’s branches to ensure their path to D.C. was safe. Hopefully her equipment was still there, but there was no telling what might’ve changed since her abrupt disappearance.

The butterfly flitted up and away when a bird swooped too closely, and Jane lost it in the dazzling reflection of sunlight off the palace walls. With nothing else to do, she fiddled with the belt at her waist, brows drawing together. Everything she’d learned at the council meeting was still fresh on her mind, whirling around so swiftly and overwhelmingly that she was on the brink of a headache. To have finally been made aware of all the pieces of the puzzle and the full extent of what was at stake
was a sobering thing. However, as unsettling as the information was, something far more disturbing weighed on her.

Just an offhand comment glossed over by everyone else and brushed off as nothing, but to her… to her it was most definitely something.

Staring unseeingly at the place where the butterfly had been, Jane told herself to wait. Allow the moment to breathe in the aftermath of the meeting, organize her thoughts into some semblance of order before taking the plunge, let the first round of dust settle before stirring up the second. But then, she’d never been very good at waiting. And so it was on the heels of a fortifying breath that she turned to face Loki.

“You lied.”

He opened his eyes and instantly found hers, one brow lifting. “About what? You’ll have to be more specific.”

“The last Infinity Stone, the one Thanos is looking for…” She slowly crossed the courtyard to stand before him. “You do know where it is, don’t you? You know because you have it. That’s what you stole from Surtur all those years ago. That’s why the fire giants have been coming around all this time.” There was a quiet challenge in her voice, daring him to deny it even as she held onto the faint hope that she was wrong, but Loki just stared down at her with an unreadable expression. “Are you even going to say anything?” she asked.

“What’s there to say?”

Hope drifted away like smoke in the wind. She was right. She was right about everything. But finally discovering the answer to one of the questions that had plagued her for centuries didn’t come with the triumphant feeling she’d expected when the truth was so crushing. Instead, she was left chilled to the bone and could only find the strength to breathe out a stunned, “Do you even realize what you’ve done?”

“I’ve a feeling you’re going to tell me regardless,” Loki said, somehow managing to look blasé and vaguely amused at the same time. “Go on, let’s get this over with.”

“Oh no.” Jane poked him in the chest. “No, you don’t get to blow this off like it’s no big deal. The only reason we have to worry about Thanos and Surtur is because they both want the stone you took. It all makes sense now. Partnering up was a win-win. They double their odds of retrieving the stone, but they don’t have to fight each other for it until they’ve finished off the rest of us.”

“If it makes you feel any better, their initial alliance was more over a mutual desire for my death. Thanos wouldn’t have learned about the stone until after he approached Surtur.”

The wry smirk quirking the corners of his mouth grated on her nerves. “Loki, this isn’t a joke!”

“Clearly,” he deadpanned, looking over her head to some point in the distance. “And you wonder why I never told you the truth.”

“You…” The words dissolved into a frustrated groan. “God, you’ve made such a mess of things.” She fist her hands in his surcoat and jerked to force his attention back to her. “Everything that’s going on is a consequence of a choice you made a thousand years ago. We are going up against an impossible enemy because of you.”

“We only have a chance at succeeding because of me.” Loki bent his head to hers, voice low and dark and hissing between his teeth. There was no trace of nonchalance anymore, just a predatory
stillness, the calm before the storm. “If I hadn’t taken the stone, Thanos would be able to crush us without contest. You should be thanking me on bended knee.”

She hated when he talked down to her. Even worse, though, was the knowledge that he was right. His actions may have caused the enmity with the fire giants, but they’d also prevented Thanos from completing the Infinity Gauntlet. It was the silver lining in a terrible situation.

The material slid free of Jane’s hands as she stepped back, focus falling to the stretch of flagstone between them. “Certain death versus probable death,” she murmured.

“Not so terrible when you think of it that way, is it?” Loki smoothed out the nonexistent wrinkles in his surcoat. “You’re welcome.”

“Somehow I doubt you’re going to get the thanks you want, but I guess if we’re forced to choose…”

The realization left her feeling strangely hollow, not unlike the time she’d chosen William Kidd over George Booth. Coming to terms with her decision hadn’t quite absolved the guilt or sense of detachment as she’d let him lower her onto the mattress and have his way, but it was what needed to be done. The lesser of two evils. In a world full of it, wasn’t that all anyone could ever hope to do?

Jane exhaled the anxiety that had twisted her stomach into knots. “You should tell them.”

Even with her gaze still lowered, there was no mistaking the way Loki stiffened at her words. “And if I do, then what?”

“I… I don’t know.” She shrugged halfheartedly. What would happen if that final secret came to light? Would it alter their plans or would it only serve to alienate him further? After witnessing everyone’s reaction during the meeting, it wasn’t a stretch to assume it would be a bit of both. “All I know is that it’s not right to keep this from them, not after the trust they’ve placed in you.”

Loki’s cynical snort had Jane’s eyes snapping to his. “As if you’ve any right to lecture me on the merits of truth. I am not the only one here keeping secrets. You may have told Thor about us, but that was it.” Without warning, he advanced, crowding into her space. “Why didn’t you tell him about the fire giants?”

Despite the tension, they had remained ever mindful of where they were. No one else was in the courtyard, but there was no telling who might be listening. They’d kept their voices low, a fact Jane was distinctly grateful for when her response rasped embarrassingly in her throat. How ridiculous that Loki’s presence, the way he dominated her every sense, affected her even now.

Willing down the heat creeping up her neck, she cleared her throat and tried again. “It wasn’t my place to tell.”

“Convenient excuse.”

“It’s not a— how was I supposed to tell him if I didn’t even know the full story?” The seconds ticked silently by, and Jane began to bristle at the smirk that didn’t quite make it to Loki’s mouth but most certainly danced in his eyes. Somewhere around the minute mark, she threw up her hands in defeat. “Alright then, if you’re so perceptive, why didn’t I say anything?”

“You didn’t want to further incriminate me.” He did smirk then, all teeth and arrogance. “Obviously.”

Jane’s nose wrinkled, and for the second time that day, she sighed. “You sure do think highly of yourself.”
“Yes, well, someone has to.”

Shouldering past him, she stomped back to her previous spot and crossed her arms. She wasn’t quite sure how the conversation had circled back to her own shortcomings, but she didn’t like it one bit. Maybe she shouldn’t have given Loki such a hard time about lying. She understood better than ever how hard it was to come clean after a lifetime of keeping things to yourself. Still…

“I should tell them.” It was the right thing to do. Difficult, but right. “If they’re going to risk their lives, they deserve to know all the facts.”

“Probably,” Loki agreed. “But you won’t.”

Jane glanced over her shoulder. “You sure about that?”

“You’ve lied for me and killed for me. You broke Thor’s heart for me.” He took a couple measured steps towards her, and she quickly turned away, heart twinging at the reminder. After a moment, she heard him resume his approach, only stopping when he was directly behind her. “You chose me, Jane,” he said, running his hands over her shoulders and down her arms. “That’s proof enough.”

“You think you know me so well,” she whispered.

He pressed his lips to the nape of her neck, sending a shiver down her spine, and she could feel him smile against her skin. “I do know you so well.”

And really, he did. Better than anyone. Possibly even better than herself. At times, it was both a relief and a burden to have someone know her so thoroughly, so intimately. Without thinking, Jane swayed back against his chest. Hands that had been brushing up and down her bare arms drifted down to her hips, and she tilted her head back to rest it on his shoulder.

“Why did you take the stone?” she asked quietly.

The silky ends of Loki’s hair that had been teasing her temple were replaced by his warm breath. “Because I could. Because I wanted to. Because I am the God of Mischief. Take your pick.” As if there would be any other reason.

Jane uncrossed her arms, one hand coming up to stroke along his jawline, the other lowering to cover one of the hands at her waist. “Where is it?”

“Hidden,” Loki said, teeth scraping along the shell of her ear. “Safe.”

Hidden, safe… and still in his possession. Jane’s heart beat a little faster. Ancient forces of destruction, they were once used to mow down entire civilizations like wheat in a field. Each individual one has the ability to wreak havoc on the realms. Odin had said it himself, and her fingers tightened around his wrist as the thought flitted through her mind.

“Maybe…” she breathed. “Loki, maybe we could use it.”

“No.”

She spun in his arms. “But—”

“No,” he snapped again, though it was more his expression that made her pause than his tone. “The Infinity Stones are sentient. They have a will of their own, and they want to be used. But theirs is a dangerous power. It’s easy to get lost in it, to confuse your actions for the stone’s. Using it in even the smallest way takes a piece of you. To use it against the entirety of Thanos and Surtur’s armies, to
willingly call on that power… it would take all that you are.”

Jane stared up at Loki, brows knitting in concern. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you admit something was beyond your abilities.”

“I didn’t say it was beyond me,” he corrected. “But I would not use it unless there was no other choice.”

It was disconcerting. Loki was always so confident, so self-assured. She understood the gravity of their situation, but seeing him hesitant brought it home in a way nothing else had.

“So what now?” she asked, placing her hands on his chest. “What will we do?”

“Fight. We’ll either defeat Thanos and Surtur or die trying.”

“Do you think we have a chance? Honestly?” Loki took a deep breath, eyes lowering slightly before returning to hers, jaw working over itself. It was answer enough, and Jane huffed a bitter laugh. “Of course you don’t. Fate says this is the end, so of course it must be right.” Jane gripped the lapels of his surcoat to keep his focus on her. “If there’s no hope, if all of this is just writing on the wall, what the hell are we even fighting for?”

“Everyone fights for something different,” he said simply.

“If that’s the case, what are you fighting for?”

Loki dipped his chin, and Jane started when she felt his fingers tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear before cupping her face. “For this. For you.”

They stepped out of space-time into the intergalactic research division at the Triskelion. After a precursory scan to make sure they weren’t noticed, Jane led the way towards a private elevator that would take them to the rooftop lab. Thankfully, their path was mostly clear. It was after seven, so most everyone had gone home for the day. Only a handful of new hires remained, using the relative quiet to slog through all the grunt work their supervisors had foisted on them. Data entry, filing, and such.

A newbie who Jane recognized but didn’t know personally turned the corner, and she neatly side-stepped before they ran into each other. “Will they be able to feel it if I touch them?” she asked.

“Only if I allow it.” Loki leaned forward and whispered, “You could always try and find out.”

She snorted and waved him off. “No thanks, I’d rather not risk making a scene when we’re trying to be discreet.”

Even if he prevented a collision, she wasn’t sure she was ready to know what it felt like to walk through someone. Still… she punched the button for the elevator before looking back the way they came, watched a man hurry by without so much as glancing at them. They were in the Triskelion, one of the most heavily-guarded buildings in the world, and no one knew. Surreal didn’t begin to cover it. She felt clever and sly. Dangerous, even. Powerful.

“Is this how you feel every time you hide your movements?” Loki hummed beside her, and she
nodded as the elevator doors slid open. “I can see the appeal.”

The lab was empty when they arrived, although it looked like whoever had last been there left in a rush. A half-eaten bowl of soup sat on one of the desks, and a bottle of soda had been knocked over, the sticky contents dripping over the side to pool on the floor. The screens linked to the telescope were still on and displayed the two spiraling arms of Messier 81. In the corner, a printer was spitting out sheet after sheet of recorded atmospheric disturbances from the nearby magnetometer. Judging from the overflow of papers strewn across the floor, it had been doing so for some time.

Leaving Loki behind, Jane plucked the magnetometer from its dock, and the printer powered down with a pitiful whine. The device’s screen was blank, which meant whatever activity it was picking up wasn’t local. Kneeling down, she found the last printout. Southend? She flipped the page over, then back again. Frowning, she set it aside and picked up the next. Amesbury. Technically, the map pinpointed a stretch of land a few miles west of Amesbury, which meant…

“Stonehenge,” she said under her breath.

“What are you muttering about over there?”

Jane glanced over her shoulder to where Loki was idly inspecting the telescope. “Nothing, just… trying to figure out what these mean.”

The third printout documented their arrival in D.C., while the fourth directed her to the highest mountain in Snowdonia National Park. Still another zeroed in on Greenwich, a borough in London.

Technological enhancement was just one of the benefits of working with Tony Stark. Before, she’d had to travel to a site to register any readings. However, the dock Tony had helped her develop expanded the magnetometer’s range exponentially. Now she could pick up anomalies from anywhere in the world without ever leaving the lab. If only they could figure out a way for it to tell her why.

Jane spread out the pages.

What was so special about Europe?

Without warning, the telescope began to whirr. Messier 81 disappeared from the screens, replaced by a loading symbol as the telescope adjusted to a new set of coordinates. Jumping up, Jane crossed the lab. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Loki said.

“Then what did you touch?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, you had to have done something,” she accused, leaning over to tap at the keyboard, futilely trying to override the commands. “Why else would it suddenly be—”

A galaxy appeared on the largest screen, and Jane cut off abruptly. It wasn’t one she immediately recognized. Without a black hole or central bar at its core to give it a defined shape, the galaxy was nothing more than a red-tinged burst of interstellar dust. An irregular, like I Zwicky 18. She slid into the computer chair and clicked through a series of prompts that would reveal the galaxy’s details. When its name popped up, she stiffened, breath catching in her throat.

“What is it?” Loki asked, peering over her shoulder.
“That’s GN-z11.”

Loki glanced from the rows upon rows of data on the smaller screen to the image on the larger. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“It’s the oldest and most distant galaxy in the observable universe,” Jane said quietly. She scrolled back up to check the details at the top of the page. “It’s also in Ursa Major.”

Something nagged at the back of her mind as she studied the red galaxy. Last year, she’d programmed the telescope to automatically adjust in the event of a deep space anomaly, hoping to find evidence that would tie the galaxies from her research to the nine realms. That meant, if Loki was telling the truth and really hadn’t messed with anything, an anomaly had just occurred. Strange thing was that she’d never recorded one from GN-z11 before.

But what if she had?

Jane fell still, eyes fixed unseeingly on the screen. So much had been going on when Loki arrived preceding the Battle of New York. She’d focused primarily on the local disturbances, but what if they’d only served as a distraction from some larger event? Everything from that time was now strictly classified and off limits. What if S.H.I.E.L.D. had buried the data before she had a chance to make the connection? Before she even knew what she was looking for?

If there was a reading from GN-z11 during that time that she’d missed…

If she could dig up coordinates that linked it to Loki’s arrival or the portal during the battle…

Jane shoved away from the desk, not even pausing to apologize when the chair legs rammed into Loki’s shins. “What are you doing?” he called after her as she took off across the room.

“That galaxy,” she panted, rifling through the clutter on one of the worktables. “I think it leads to the Realm Between Realms.” She moved to a set of desks and yanked open the drawers one by one before continuing on to some wall-mounted shelves full of devices. “I can’t prove it, but I’m almost positive. I just need the rest of my…” She slammed the doors to the storage closet closed and whirled around, hands buried in her hair. “Where the hell is all my stuff?”

Jane stopped her frantic search and glanced over to where Loki was still standing by the telescope, staring up at the screens. Immediately, all her wild, nervous energy slipped away. Night had taken over the city, and the inky sky bled through the glass ceiling. In the dim light, she drank in his profile, the deep furrow between his brows, the grim set of his mouth. The glow of the galaxy bathed him in light as red as blood.

Abandoning the hunt for her equipment, she returned to him, attention never straying.

“We’re not going to open a path to the Realm Between Realms,” Loki said softly but firmly once she’d come up beside his elbow.

She reached up to lay a hand against his cheek, and his gaze slid to hers. There were shadows in the depths of his eyes, deeper and darker than anything in the lab, and her heart ached at what he’d endured. Time was supposed to heal all wounds, but sometimes she wondered if those memories would haunt him for the rest of eternity.

“We’re not going to open a path,” he repeated.

“No, we’re not. But knowing this could help predict Thanos’ movements when the time comes. It’s better than just being able to track the Convergence.” When his eyes flicked over to the screen
again, she swept a thumb over his arching cheekbone. “Hey…” She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her face into the warm leather of his tunic, listened to the steady drum of his heartbeat. “You’re not alone. Not this time.”

They stayed that way for a moment, seconds ticking silently by, until Loki finally pressed a chaste kiss to the crown of her head and stepped back. He didn’t look at the galaxy anymore, but he did take a deep breath to regain his bearings. Jane watched him gather himself, shedding the rare moment of vulnerability like a second skin.

“Come,” he said, holding out a hand. “We need to get the rest of your equipment.”

“You know where it is?” He cocked a brow, and she rolled her eyes. Of course he’d know where it was. “Hold on, let me just…” She pushed a stack of papers on the desk out of the way and found a sharpie beneath the mess. Uncapping it with her teeth, she scribbled the coordinates to GN-z11 on the back of her hand. “Okay, I’m ready.” She pulled back again. “No, wait!”

Loki issued a long-suffering sigh. “Will we be completing this task sometime today, Jane?”

“Are you that eager to get back?” she teased. “I was just wondering if my equipment was with Erik.”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Hm…” She drummed her fingers against her lips thoughtfully. “I know you’re fresh out of the dungeons, but how do you feel about breaking the rules one last time?”

The smirk that curled the corners of his lips was pure mischief. “Go on.”

“I can figure out all this stuff with the Convergence myself, but it’ll be much easier and much quicker if Erik is there to help me. Not to mention the things he’s seen after being under the Tesseract’s control could come in handy. You get what I’m saying?”

“You want to bring him with us to Asgard,” Loki concluded. He tilted his head in mock consideration. “Well, the All-Father didn’t say we couldn’t…”

“But he didn’t say we couldn’t either.”

Jane stepped into his waiting arms with a grin and felt the unrelenting pressure of space-time fold in around them. It didn’t dampen her spirits, though, or the cathartic sense of glee she felt at defying Odin’s wishes. Loki, it seemed, was rubbing off on her.

“There it is again! Ian, did you get it? Wait, no, that one was different. It didn’t last as long as the others and wasn’t nearly as powerful. I think it’s… yes, definitely more centralized, but— oh! Darcy, look! Look at those gravitational waves! That’s fascinating. It’s not very often we record something like that. I wonder why it popped up in the middle of everything else, though.”

Outside the spare bedroom of Darcy’s flat that had been converted to a makeshift lab, Jane smiled.

Why, indeed.

It hadn’t been long since Thor whisked her away to Asgard, but it felt like she hadn’t seen Erik in
ages. Hearing his voice now warmed her in a way little else could. Obviously Loki meant a great
deal to her, but he hadn’t been there when she lost everything. Out of all her years, no one had ever
or would ever mean quite the same to her as Erik. Their bond was something else entirely. Which
was one of the reasons she hesitated a few steps short of entering the room.

“So, I was thinking…” Turning around, Jane fiddled with the belt of her gown. “It might be better
if you, you know, wait here. At least in the beginning. Just until I’ve explained everything.” She
sighed at the way his nose wrinkled. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“I’ve been more or less relegated to your chauffeur. How else should I look at you?”

“It’s not like that, I…” She drug a hand down her face. Maybe they should’ve had this discussion
earlier. “Look, this is going to be hard enough as it is. These people are my closest friends, and I’m
about to tell them I’ve been lying to them all these years. Not to mention you were attacking us last
time you were here. Just give me a chance to explain everything before you come waltzing in.
Please,” she added as an afterthought.

Loki gave her a long, hard look, then leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, arms crossed.

“Very well.”

Jane clasped her hands. “Thank you. I’ll come get you when I’m ready.”

The arrangement helped calm her nerves, and as she rounded the doorway, she felt fully prepared to
deal with whatever chaos ensued. And it was chaos.

On the far side of the room, Darcy had a bowl of ice cream in one hand and held the phase meter out
like a metal detector with the other. With a spoon hanging from her mouth, she rotated slowly in
place, watching for increased activity. Every once in a while, she’d tuck the device under her arm
and take a bite.

Erik stood behind a desk near the window. His shirt was hopelessly wrinkled, his hair stood on end,
and his five o’clock shadow had begun the transition to a full-fledged beard. It looked like he hadn’t
showered, much less slept, in days. Then again, it was almost three in the morning in London, so
maybe he hadn’t.

It was Ian, typing away on the computer in what looked like one of Darcy’s old band shirts, who
spotted her first.

“Isn’t that…?” he asked, pointing.

“Jane!”

Darcy let the spoon fall to the floor and discarded the bowl onto the windowsill where it wobbled
precariously as she darted across the room. Erik cut her off, though, shoving through to envelop
Jane in a crushing hug.

“Jane! Oh my god, Jane, are you okay? We were so worried. Five days of not knowing anything.
It was just like last time. You could’ve been dead for all we knew. What happened? Where have
you been? What—” He held her out at arm’s length. “What are you wearing?”

“It’s called a dress, Erik. Obviously,” Darcy joked as she squeezed between them to also hug Jane.
“I’m glad you’re still alive. I wouldn’t get paid if you weren’t.”

The phase meter bumped uncomfortably against the back of Jane’s head, but she chuckled through a
wince. “Nice to see your priorities are in line.”
“Always.”

She waved at Ian before returning to Erik. “You’ve been to Asgard,” he said, gesturing to her dress.

“And you’ve been neglecting the laundry. Where are your pants?” she asked with a laugh. He shook his head wordlessly, eyes watery, and Jane found hers welling up also. Ignoring the fact that he was in just a button-up and underwear, she cupped his face. “I’m so sorry for scaring you. But everything’s okay now. Or it’s going to be. There’s so much I have to—”

A loud crash interrupted her apology, followed by a squeak from Darcy. Erik’s eyes darted to the side only to widen in horror, all the blood draining from his face as he jerked her behind him, nearly dislocating her shoulder in the process. Meanwhile, Ian crab crawled backwards across the floor to get away from the door.

Jane peeked under Erik’s outstretched arm. “Really?” she groaned.

Shrugging nonchalantly, Loki stood in the doorway and scanned the room. “I thought you’d forgotten me.”

“It hasn’t even been five minutes. It hasn’t been two minutes.” She ducked under Erik’s arm, ignoring his scrabbling fingers trying to pull her back, and put her hands on her hips. “What part of I’ll come get you when I’m ready do you not understand?”

“I suppose time just doesn’t feel the same when you’re immortal.”

“Loki!”

“Are you… is this…” Erik tried weakly. “Did you come here together?”

There was a slight smirk on Loki’s face that, unlike the one when she’d asked him to defy Odin, made Jane inherently nervous, so she held up a threatening finger, jaw clenched, brows raised. She didn’t need him saying anything and screwing things up worse than he already had. Erik already looked like he was ten seconds from either throwing up or passing out. Maybe both.

“Oh, first things first,” she said, guiding Erik further into the room. “Yes, Loki and I are here together. We’ve come to pick up my equipment.”

“Your…”

“Equipment, yes.” She motioned to Darcy, plastered against the wall with Ian clutching one of her legs, to roll her a chair. “Here, why don’t you sit down? I can explain everything, but it’s a long, complicated story.” It might break his trust in her, too, but there wasn’t much she could do about that.

Once Erik was seated, Jane crouched down on the floor in front of him and rested a hand on his knee. This was almost worse than when she told Thor. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at Loki, worrying her lip. The smirk was gone, though, replaced by a thin-lipped expression. He dipped his chin in silent encouragement, and she took a deep, steadying breath.

“Let me start at the beginning.”

She told them everything. Well, everything she could. Eating the apple, living through all those centuries, the truth behind the Chitauri invasion, the background with Thanos, the dire situation the universe now faced. And Loki. Feeling the weight of his regard, she explained everything they’d been through together so no one could doubt how much he meant to her or where her allegiance
stood.

By the time she was done, they knew just as much as the Asgardians, even if they couldn’t fully comprehend some of the details. Surprisingly enough, Darcy and Ian seemed to take it in stride. Erik… not so much. There were a lot of head shakes, sputtering coughs, and hands raking through his thinning hair, but he managed. And once she’d wrapped it up, Erik offered a small smile that had her exhaling all her pent-up anxiety in a shuddering breath.

Darcy was the first to break the silence.

“Umm, I have a question,” she said, raising her hand. “What was it like hunting for food alongside dinosaurs and dressing in the skins of your enemies?”

Loki snorted, and Jane shook her head. A light touch had her looking up, and she focused on Erik. He was still out of sorts, but Darcy’s ridiculous question had at least brought some color back to his cheeks.

“You know how important this is. You’ve known all this time, I just didn’t understand until it was too late,” Jane said. He’d never held it against her, but she found it hard to forgive herself for dismissing the things he’d talked about during his moments. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I probably wouldn’t have believed it either if the roles were reversed. But I have to admit…” He huffed a laugh. “There’s nothing more reassuring than realizing the world is crazier than you are.”

Patting his knee, she stood up and began gathering equipment from around the room. She handed the devices and a notebook containing her most current research to Loki who made them disappear in glimmers of green light. They’d be safely hidden until they returned to Asgard.

“This will help me predict the spatial extrusions as we get closer to the Convergence. It’ll give us warning, but it won’t be enough to stop Thanos,” she said and looked to Erik. “I’m also going to need everything you’ve got on this. All your work on gravimetric anomalies.”

“Of course.” He jumped up. “Absolutely.”

One by one, he unearthed the gravimetric spikes from the closet and passed them to her. They still wouldn’t be enough to prevent what was coming – if Thanos really did have the other Infinity Stones, he could travel across the realms regardless – but placing the spikes at Asgard’s focal point would stabilize the weak spots between the realms and possibly prevent his armies from following.

“I was…” Jane paused, watching the controller for the spikes vanish. Not until all traces of Loki’s magic were gone, even the lingering ghost of it on her skin, did she turn. “Erik, I was hoping you’d come back with me. I don’t know if I can do this without you.”

“Hey, what about us?” Darcy exclaimed with a frown.

Still curled up on the floor, Ian shook his head vehemently. “Nope, not us. I’m perfectly fine with staying here.”

“Come on, don’t be such a chicken. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Jane, you know what he did.” Despite the soft tone, the room went silent at Erik’s words. There was an unspoken to me that hung heavy in the air. He cast a wary glance towards Loki but forged on regardless. “I’ll never be the same.”
“Yeah, you should see some of the things he gets up to now,” Darcy said. “Speaking in tongues, drawing crazy maps. Oh, and streaking!”

Confused, Jane frowned. “Streaking?”

“Let’s just say we’ve been banned from ever visiting Stonehenge again,” Ian quipped.

“They’ve gotten worse,” Erik explained. “My moments. The closer we get to the Convergence, the stronger they get. I’m… afraid. I never know when they’ll happen or what I’ll do. I want to help, I’m just not sure me going with you is a good idea. For your safety.”

“The damage is not permanent.”

Everyone turned to Loki as one.

“No one could’ve stayed under the Mind Stone’s influence for as long as you did without being altered in some way,” he said, looking bored as he brushed dust from the vambraces on his arms. “I can reverse the effects, though. If we defeat Thanos and retrieve the stone, I can repair what’s been done.”

Jane took one step forward. “I thought you said they were too dangerous to use.” Why would he risk that? But Loki only slid those grey-green eyes to her, and she could hear the echo of his words as clear as day.

For this.

For you.

“Oh.” Erik rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s… yeah, that’s good news. Thank you. I think.”

Loki nodded once but continued to hold Jane’s gaze. It was as close to an apology as any of them would ever receive, and her heart thumped almost painfully in her chest. People would never see him the way they did Thor, but he deserved so much more than their scorn and contempt. His attention slid away to the city beyond the window, and Jane swallowed thickly.

“You’ll come with me, then?” she asked Erik, throat still tight with emotion.

“Yes.” He snatched up a notebook of his own. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Just so you know, we weren’t given explicit permission to bring you back,” she said. Heimdall might not have interfered with their impromptu plan, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t have a lot of explaining to do. “It’ll be best if you make a good first impression.”

“Don’t I always?”

Jane threw Erik a sheepish grin. “You’re still in your underwear.”

He looked down, then back up. “Yes, I am. I’ll just… go get my pants real quick.”

“Good idea.”

The minute he ducked out of the room, he was replaced by Darcy. “So that’s it?” She stormed forward, throwing her hands in the air. “You expect me to wait here while you go off and save the universe? What about getting to see my boyfriend?”

“I’m your boyfriend,” Ian corrected.
“You’re my human boyfriend. I’m talking about my alien boyfriend.” Darcy spun back to Jane. “You remember him, right? Blonde, nice facial hair, carried a sword.”

“Fandral?” Loki supplied, nose wrinkling.

“Is that his name? Nice.”

Jane rested her hands on Darcy’s shoulders in an attempt to ground out some of that hectic energy. “Listen, I know you want to go, but this is going to be really dangerous. If things don’t work out…” She didn’t even want to go there. “I need you and Ian to stay and use the second set of gravimetric spikes here on Earth, that way nothing comes through during the Convergence.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “Fine,” she eventually relented, then pointed a fingernail polished to match her red beanie in Jane’s face. “But you have to promise me you’ll come back alive and in one piece. None of this I’ll do my best nonsense.”

“You know it’s scientifically impossible to—”

Darcy drowned out the rest of her sentence with a loud groan and shoved her away. “Oh my god, never mind. Just get out of here already.” But Jane snagged one of her hands, reeling her back into a hug.

“Stay safe,” she murmured with a wet sniff and was forced to blink away the tears in her eyes when Darcy squeezed a little tighter in return.

“You too. I’ll see you soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Oof, I had to cut this chapter short. If I included everything I originally planned, it would’ve been a monster. Because of that, and knowing things like this will continue to happen as we wrap things up, I’ve extended the chapter count. Right now, we’re looking at eight more chapters plus an epilogue, although it may end up being more!

As stated above, GN-z11 is the oldest, most distant galaxy in the observable universe. Keep in mind that the Realm Between Realms is tied to the creation myth for Yggdrasil discussed in Chapter Thirty-Two, in which Ginnungagap, the traditional name for the Void, was originally divided by the formation of the nine realms. The fact that GN-z11 is so old and so far away fits nicely with the idea of it corresponding to the Realm Between Realms. That it lies within Ursa Major, the primary constellation of all the activity in this story, is even nicer.

Feel free to follow me on tumblr! Chapter updates, music recommendations, and items of inspiration are all tracked here.
Guys. GUYS. This update is on time, as promised, for the first time in probably two years! Do you hear that? I think it’s the sound of angels singing. Miracles do happen.

Music recommendation for this chapter is All I Want by Dawn Golden.

There's also some amazing art to go with this fic! Check it out here!

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“See, we were never about butterflies. We’ve always been about burning stars. All about us is unearthly and radiant.”

They left Darcy and Ian with specific instructions regarding the gravimetric spikes. Based on the patterns, Erik believed Greenwich would be the focal point on Earth, and he made sure they understood exactly what needed to be done and when. There was no room for error. If they messed up even the slightest bit, there wouldn’t be a second chance. But as scatterbrained as Darcy could be, Jane trusted her. When push came to shove, she always came through. She wouldn’t let them down.

If only the Asgardians could learn to have that kind of faith.

“You knew the stipulations,” Thor said under his breath, head bent towards Loki as they entered the throne room. “What were you thinking?”

Loki shrugged. “It was Jane’s idea.”

“Hey!” Trailing behind them alongside a pale yet amazed Erik – he’d handled the trip through space-time better than expected – Jane bristled at being thrown under the bus. “You didn’t exactly try to talk me out of it.” She knew Loki was only doing it to get a rise out of her, but still… so much for solidarity.

“If you decided this, there must have been a reason,” Thor said, looking at her over his shoulder. “I only hope it was a good one.”

Before she could defend herself, though, they stopped at the foot of the stairs. Atop the raised dais, the All-Father glared down at them from his seat on the throne. He was flanked by two ravens
perched on either of its twin arcs, one of which flapped its wings and cawed when Jane came to stand beside Loki, tugging Erik with her.

They stood there, awkward and uneasy, until Odin finally lifted one hand to wave off the Einherjar stationed around the perimeter. Jane watched the guards file out from the corner of her eye, leaving the five of them alone. At least this time there wouldn’t be a room full of people to bear witness to what was bound to be a… stimulating conversation.

“Jane Foster,” Odin called out, voice echoing throughout the room, and she swallowed, steeling herself. “Had I known your equipment included another human, I would’ve been more specific.”

“It wasn’t planned. If I’d thought about it, I would’ve said something during the council,” she replied. “Bringing him back didn’t even cross my mind until we were already on Earth.”

“Yes, I’m sure there are a great many things that don’t cross your mind.”

Jane frowned, but the light brush of Erik’s fingers to the back of her hand checked the instinctive rise in her temper. Ever the peacekeeper, even when he was thrown out of his depths and into another realm. Loki, on the other hand, was probably itching for her to say what was really on her mind. She peeked at Erik, nose scrunching at his knowing expression.

Pick your battles, he seemed to say. Nose wrinkling, she turned back to Odin.

“I didn’t intentionally deceive you,” she said with thinly-veiled civility. “Erik is a renowned scientist. We’ve worked together for many years, and he’s made discoveries separate from mine that will help us. He designed some of the equipment we brought himself. His insight will be invaluable.”

“That may be so, but this was not part of our agreement.” Odin aimed his spear at her, staring down its length. “You disobeyed your king.”

The accusation stoked the low-burning coals of her anger, and Jane didn’t fight it when it flared to life with a vengeance.

Passivity was overrated.

She lifted her chin, eyes narrow and keen as she resolutely held Odin’s gaze. “With all due respect, All-Father, I don’t care. I’m not an Asgardian, as everyone is so fond of reminding me, which means you’re not my king.”

“Jane!” Thor hissed, turning to her in an instant. Meanwhile, Loki just tilted his head back and snorted, an amused smirk curling his lips. It was Erik who eventually broke the dense silence, drawing Odin’s attention.

“Your, uh… your majesty?” he said. “I won’t be any trouble, I assure you. I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“This isn’t about your willingness, it’s about your presence being unwelcome,” Odin snapped, then turned back to Jane. “Since you arrived, you have been a constant source of contention, pushing limits, testing the lengths of my patience. Your knowledge of the Convergence is the only reason you’ve been allowed to stay. You guaranteed you could do the work.”

“And I can!” Jane maintained, incensed.

“Yet you bring another Midgardian to aid you.”
“I didn’t have to, I wanted to. We don’t have a lot of time. Things will go much faster if he’s here to help.”

Erik, who’d been tapping nervously at her wrist trying in vain to keep her calm, perked up. “I don’t know if it helps, but I’ve also seen——”

Jane cut him off with a discreet jab to his ribs.

Odin knew one of her friends had been under Loki’s control during the Battle of New York. He might even know that Erik just so happened to be that friend, seeing how she’d mentioned his name the first time they met. But in the event he didn’t, now probably wasn’t the best time to get into that. Given the choice, she’d rather that little bit of history and the details of Erik’s *moments* stay between them.

Closing her eyes for a second, Jane took a deep breath. Everything would be so much simpler if they could bring the conversation back to more amicable territory. However, while she’d make every effort for civility, she refused to sacrifice her beliefs for no other reason than to placate a prejudiced king. There were some hills she was willing to die upon.

“I understand you’re upset,” Jane said, calm yet firm. “But I’m not going to apologize for doing something that could help win this war.”

Stubbornness, pride, and sheer determination kept her spine ramrod straight in the wake of Odin’s furious glower. Going against the All-Father was intimidating, but she’d faced more terrifying things over the years. She’d witnessed the utter depravity of humanity, suffered the violent creatures of the other realms, looked death in the eye multiple times and survived. After all that, it would take more than a scowl to browbeat her.

“I support Jane in this,” Thor said suddenly. She looked over, surprised, but his focus was trained on his father. “This is Ragnarök, not some tedious political deliberation. Our time would be better spent focusing on the plan ahead. Jane knows what it will take to predict the Convergence. Whatever she needs, we should be willing to accommodate. How can we say we’ve done our duty protecting the nine realms unless we’ve explored all options?”

Bringing Odin’s personal responsibility as king to the table was a bold move, but it worked. The All-Father’s jaw clenched, although this time it was less in anger and more in thought.

“You would vouch for him?” Odin asked, motioning to Erik.

Thor nodded. “Erik is exceedingly intelligent, honorable, and loyal. I would trust him with my life. He’s a valuable ally. And a good friend.”

Thor turned briefly to Erik, then his eyes slid to Jane, and her heart swelled with a rush of affection. She didn’t deserve his support after everything she’d done, but he gave it nevertheless. Even if it was only for the good of the realms, he’d still defended her. He was a better man than any of them could ever hope to be.

Offering a shy smile, she was relieved to see Thor’s mouth twitch in response.

Forgiveness. The beginnings of it, at least.

She’d take it.

Between them, Loki rolled his eyes. “I vouch for him as well, if that means anything.”
All the nerves and stress from the past couple days coalesced into a single emotion that bubbled up at the irony of Loki’s statement, and Jane had to bite her lip to keep a laugh from spilling out. Even Thor seemed amused as he shook his head with a soft, if not exhausted, expression.

“You humans…” Odin said, pointedly disregarding Loki. Thor’s support seemed to have done the trick, though. There was no more disgust in the All-Father’s tone, just a begrudging sort of acceptance. “I’ll never understand what they see in you, what it is that draws them in.”

Jane lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “Your guess is as good as mine. I’m nothing special. I do know my life would’ve been significantly simpler if I’d never met any of you.”

“Indeed, you’re more trouble than you’re worth. If you weren’t of use, I’d send you back to Midgard just to be rid of you.”

“Trust me, when all this is said and done, I’ll be happy to return,” she said. “But until then, you need me. And I need your cooperation as well. We don’t have to like each other, but we do have to work together if we want to succeed. The enemy of my enemy and all that.”

Odin regarded her for a moment, tapping a finger against the arm of the throne. “It seems we agree on at least one thing.” Then he dipped his chin and stood. “Very well, you have my consent. Asgard is at your disposal. Do whatever it takes to aid us in defeating Thanos.”

“Thank you.”

An acknowledging nod was followed by a thud as Odin’s spear connected with the floor. Immediately, one of the side doors opened to reveal an Einherjar. “Have Hlín show our guests to their chambers,” he ordered. “They’ve had a long day and are surely in need of rest.”

Jane relaxed, tension bleeding from her muscles. Long day was an understatement. Attending two intense meetings where she was put on the spot, travelling through space-time to both D.C. and London, and revealing the truth of her life story to Erik had left her physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. Right then, falling into bed sounded absolutely wonderful. She didn’t even feel like taking the time to bathe.

With a hand to Erik’s back, she guided him towards the dark-haired woman – Hlín, she assumed – who’d appeared beside the guard in the doorway. Thor and Loki fell into step behind them only to stop short when the All-Father called after them.

“Thor, Loki. A word, if you will.”

Jane hesitated, eyes darting back and forth between Loki’s profile and Odin as he descended the steps from the throne. The ravens took flight at his movement, one of them soaring up and out a skylight while the other coasted down onto the All-Father’s shoulder. It issued a series of low rattles and clicks, which Odin tilted his head to listen to, before taking off after its partner.

“It’ll only take a moment,” Odin assured when he reached the bottom step.

Loki gently touched her elbow. “Go on.”

“But—”

“Here,” he interrupted and, after a brief glimmer of light, held out her phase meter. “Something to keep you occupied.”

It really wasn’t fair at all, Loki offering that. He knew she wanted to stay, but he also knew she’d be
hard-pressed to resist the opportunity to use her equipment. It would be the first time, after all. The first time anyone looked up at the Realm Eternal’s stars and saw something other than distant planets and other realms. The first time anyone measured its particle data, gravitational wavelengths, and atmospheric activity. The first time anyone used science, not magic, to unravel its mysteries.

Jane snatched the device out of his hand with a glare. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.” Then she stomped off before either he or Thor could say anything, Erik trotting along after her.

The Einherjar shut the door to the throne room firmly behind them as soon as they passed through, but she didn’t dwell on what she was missing anymore. Her thoughts were elsewhere. Weariness pricked the back of her eyes, but the phase meter was heavy in her hand. It called to her like a siren song. She wouldn’t be able to rest until she tried it at least once.

But she also couldn't send Erik off on his own. Not yet.

He'd spent the last few sleepless days frantically searching for her in the cosmos only for their happy reunion to be overshadowed by the revelation of both her life and the fate of the realms. Then she'd asked him to trust Loki, the man who’d put him through so much, and whisked him away to Asgard. The least she could do was see him settled before giving into her own desires.

Hlín stepped forward, clasped her hands, and curtsied. “Welcome to Asgard. If you'll please follow me.”

Erik fell in behind Hlín, and Jane fell in behind him, casting a longing look through the archways to the midnight sky beyond. However, when Erik glanced back to make sure she was following, deep bags beneath bleary eyes, the pull in her bones ebbed. He needed her more right then, and that was okay. It wouldn’t take long. The stars would still be there when they were finished.

After one last peek at Erik already bathed, changed, and passed out in bed, Jane closed the door. She stood alone in the hallway and weighed the options, thumbing over the phase meter’s power switch even as she eyed the entrance to her quarters. It was a pointless debate, though. Curiosity would always win out in the end.

The device powered on with a quiet beep. Normally, the screen displayed the brand name for a second before continuing to a replica of Earth with a localized compass in the lower corner. This time, instead of showing Earth, it transitioned to a loading symbol.

Jane watched the line of dots blink one at a time repeatedly across the screen. She’d been anticipating trouble with the parameters – Asgard’s gravitational fields matching up with Earth’s were impossible – but there was no way of knowing how the sudden change in location would affect the initial readout. Technically, the atmospheric scale operated independently and shouldn’t need to be reconfigured. She could only hope it adjusted automatically. She really didn’t want to wipe everything and reprogram it from scratch.

A chamber maid turned the far corner, interrupting her thoughts. Jane smiled when she neared, but the woman merely pursed her lips and nodded stiffly before entering one of the other rooms. Polite yet cold… it was better than the outright derision she’d been receiving.

The phase meter beeped again, and she looked down to see the screen had come to life. Earth was
gone, replaced by a flat disc of land that could only be Asgard. Several dots flickered in the space surrounding it in a clear sign of atmospheric activity.

“Oh, thank god,” she breathed.

A single flash of yellow around the compass also indicated the local tracking was at least attempting to work. The settings must not have been too far apart, which meant the gravitational fields were decently similar. It shouldn’t take more than a couple hours to fully calibrate. She could work with that. But in the meantime…

Jane started back down the hallway. As expected, the compass was off. She was headed north, but without Earth’s magnetic field to guide it, the north end of the needle wavered between south-southeast and due south.

Perhaps Asgard’s fields ran the exact opposite. Or maybe the fact that Asgard was flat instead of a sphere had something to do with it. Either way, it was a question for another time. Proper navigation during an anomaly was good for research and comparative purposes, but all she needed to investigate was a direction. The faint yellow spike and the real-time location gave her that much. Now all she had to do was track down where it was.

Jane left the living quarters behind and followed the main hallway. Several dead ends had her backtracking, but it wasn’t long before she found herself at the far west wall. The spike of activity flared twenty-five, maybe thirty meters in front of her. Not far but definitely outside the palace.

Spinning on her heel, she jogged back to the closest staircase leading to the ground floor, holding the hem of her dress up to keep from tripping and ignoring the haughty looks the Asgardians threw her way as she went. Let them judge. She didn’t care anymore. A sharp right at the bottom of the stairs, a quick dash through another couple corridors, then she was beelining for the west entrance.

Jane threw open the door… and stopped in surprise at the forest beyond.

No, not forest.

Orchard.

Rows upon rows of apple trees spread out before her, foliage silver in the moonlight, limbs laden with fruit. They filled the space, all the way to a low-lying wall in the distance that curved back around to meet the palace in a semicircle. Blinking slowly, she took a step forward, and the stone floors gave way to lush, springy grass. It was so peaceful and serene. She felt like she could curl up beneath one of the trees and go to sleep, blanketed by the temperate air and starlight. That wasn’t why she came here, though.

Waving off a small moth attracted by the phase meter’s screen, she studied the anomaly’s position. Roughly twenty meters out… if there was anything to see, she could easily have done so between the tree trunks. She took a couple more steps, driven forward by the urge to test it like they had the one in the abandoned warehouse, but its intensity was already lessening. The yellow flare on the compass grew dimmer and dimmer until it was barely there anymore, just a faint opening in the fabric of space-time. Then it blinked out completely.

“Midnight rendezvous?”

The voice cut through her disappointment at the lost opportunity, and Jane whirled around to see Freyr and Freyja on the other side of the doorway. The Vanir siblings were watching her with obvious amusement, although Freyja’s edged more towards goading rather than her brother’s good-
natured teasing.

“Iðunn’s orchard is appealing, but you’d have better luck in the gardens,” Freyja continued. “They’re far more... convenient. There’s a door over there, just behind the ivy, that’ll take you to them.” Entering the orchard, she motioned to a section of the wall almost completely covered in vines. A smirk danced across her lips as she cupped one hand around her mouth and whispered conspiratorially, “Don’t tell anyone, though. It’s a secret.”

Freyr chuckled as if his sister had told some sort of joke, and Jane had the distinct impression they were laughing at her. Blushing, she shook her head. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“Of course not,” Freyja said, wending her way past Jane. Pausing under the nearest tree, she fingered an apple hanging from one of the lower branches, flashed that playful grin over her shoulder, and winked. “It never is, is it?”

Before she could deny it again, Freyr interrupted. “As much as I’d love to stay and see where this goes, I really must be going. Duty calls.” He gave Freyja a pointed look. “Sister…”

It sounded like a warning, but if it was, Freyr paid it no mind. “Yes, of course. Fair winds and following seas, brother.”

Freyr bowed low, then spun on his heel, ice-blue cloak slicing through the air and moonlight glinting off his silver armor. The departure was unexpected, to say the least. He had a mischievous streak that rivaled Loki’s at times, and it didn’t seem normal for him to skip out on a moment like this, duty or not.

“Alfheim,” Freyja explained in response to Jane’s silent inquiry. “Now that you’ve returned, he will speak with the ljósálfar as the All-Father requested. I trust your trip to Midgard went well?”

Jane looked down at the phase meter still buzzing quietly in her hand. It wasn’t picking up any more local activity, only brief pulses of atmospheric disturbances, so she turned it off. “Yes, very.”

“And your reunion with Loki?”

The question was innocent enough, but something in Freyja’s tone had Jane’s attention snapping to her. They stood there in silence, gauging one another. Freyr might be lecherous, but he didn’t make her uneasy in the same way Freyja did. There was a slyness to her, an underlying cruelty, and Jane absently wondered how she’d ever come to be known as the Goddess of Love. At least she only faced one of the siblings now. When they’d been on either side, she’d felt a bit like a cornered animal.

“Things have been well,” Jane said, carefully neutral.

“I’m happy to hear that. You two have been through quite the ordeal. You deserve a moment’s peace. It’s a shame you haven’t had more time alone. Just one night…” Freyja tutted. “That’s barely a tease. Loki once kept me in bed for an entire week, and that was after only three years apart.”

Jane stiffened, but Freyja carried on so smoothly it left her wondering if she’d misheard or not.

“If he’s convinced you to meet him in the gardens, don’t let him take you to the Élivágar Streams. They make for a lovely atmosphere, but it really isn’t the easiest place to maneuver. Between you and me, the gazebo is more accommodating.”

Lips thinning in a tight smile, Jane nodded. “Thank you, I’ll... keep that in mind.”
The seconds ticked by as Freyja studied her. “You really aren’t meeting him here, are you?” she eventually asked. It was more an observation than seeking an answer, though, and she hummed thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“I’m sorry, what’s interesting?”

“Just that, if you see fit to wander, Loki must be losing his touch.”

“His touch,” Jane echoed, confused.

Freyja laughed, a lilting, melodic sound, the first genuine emotion she’d displayed yet. “Yes, dear, his touch. Midgard can’t be that different. Surely you know what I mean. No?” She caught the spindly end of a branch and ran two fingers down its length with a coy smile. “Let’s just say that few stray once they’ve had a taste of mischief, so to speak. There’s more than one reason they call him Silvertongue.”

Jane blanched. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’ve upset you. Apologies, I suppose I am being terribly forward,” Freyja said in the most unapologetic tone imaginable. “It really is none of my business.”

“No, it’s not,” Jane snapped, face hot with a mix of embarrassment and anger.

Unfazed, Freyja merely smiled. “Well, then, I suppose I’ll take my leave so you can do… whatever it is you’re doing. Good night.”

The branch bounced gently when Freyja released it, and she practically glided past Jane who stumbled in an attempt to maintain some distance between them. Her jaw hurt with how tightly she gritted her teeth. Of course Freyja would be infuriatingly graceful in everything she did. Meanwhile, here she was, tripping over her own feet.

“And Jane?” She rotated just enough to see Freyja silhouetted in the doorway. “Do try not to stay out too late. One never knows what monsters lurk in the dark.”

With that, the door closed, leaving Jane alone in the quiet, moonlit orchard. The only remaining sound was crickets chirping and the occasional rustle of leaves in the breeze. That, and her irritated huff. She knew the Asgardians were haughty and rude, but Freyja was something else entirely.

Jane stalked over to the tree. Up close, she could see what looked like an ordinary apple tree was far from it. The branches and leaves were normal, but the apples were dusted with shimmering gold. Even the flowering buds held a somewhat metallic sheen. It was breathtaking, just like everything else in the realm.

She wrinkled her nose as if the tree had personally offended her.

Then she batted the branch Freyja had been messing with for good measure.

One of the apples fell to the ground, disrupted by the sudden movement, and the dust puffed off to settle on the grass. Jane nudged it with the toe of her sandal, wondering if it really was one of Æðunn’s apples. Without the gold sheen, it looked the same. Granted, the details had become fuzzy after so many years, but she remembered it being smaller than normal and oddly warm. Kneeling down, she picked it up and spun it in her hand. Yes, definitely warm. It didn’t glow, though. Not this time.

“It’ll be of little use to you now.” She wasn’t as startled by company the second time around.
Neither was she surprised to see Loki had appeared from nowhere and was now leaning against the tree. “Unless you’re in the mood for a midnight snack, in which case feel free to eat it.”

“I think I’ve had enough apples for one lifetime,” she said, turning away. That only led to a view of the palace door, though, reminding her of Freyja. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough.”

She figured as much. Running a hand through her hair, she exhaled a heavy sigh. “Has it always been like that?”

“More or less. The Æsir have always been less… welcoming. Now they are simply more forthright about it,” Loki said. “That you’ve aligned yourself with me doesn’t help. Remaining with Thor would’ve garnered you more respect.”

While possible, it was far from a guarantee. She’d been on the receiving end of their prejudice both times Thor brought her to Asgard, before she’d even come clean with the truth. There were some exceptions – Thor after he’d spent time on Earth, the Warriors Three, Heimdall, Týr; even Freyr to a degree – but as a whole, they despised her. Loki, too.

Jane stared down at the apple in her hand. “Sometimes I think it would be easier to just run away,” she said solemnly. “Leave, forget all this, go home.”

“That would require knowing where home was to begin with.”

Loki’s response wasn’t comforting or consoling, but it wasn’t condescending either. It just… was, and her heart ached in an indescribable way. She didn’t need the Asgardians’ respect. The entire realm could hate them, and it wouldn’t change the way she felt. In the end, there was just the two of them. The only real comfort they’d ever have was in each other, and that was enough. Home didn’t have to be a physical place to which she could return. Loki was as much a home as any place she’d lived.

Jane turned back, eyes instantly finding Loki’s beneath the tree. They gleamed from the shadows, drawing her like a magnet, and she was powerless to resist. Had always been powerless to resist.

The space between them disappeared in slow, measured steps. When she finally stopped before him, he straightened from the tree, one hand lifting to tuck the hair away from her face. Fingertips grazed her ear, the shoulder bared by her gown, the hollow above her collarbones, and she shivered at the touch. The spark of magic across her skin as Loki made the phase meter and apple disappear only served to heighten the sensation. The atmosphere was charged, electric.

And yet…

Jane’s focus fell to his mouth, further to the crosshatching leather of his tunic. She didn’t want to ask, but the question burned at her. Did you sleep with her? Did you sleep with Freyja? Her tongue darted out to wet her lips as she placed a hand flat to his chest, felt the steady beat beneath her palm. What right did she have to be jealous? It wasn’t like she hadn’t slept with other men over the centuries.

As if sensing her thoughts, Loki reached out and caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilted her head up so she was forced to meet his gaze.

“I chose you, Jane. Out of all the mortals in Midgard, out of all the beings in all the realms, I chose you.” Shifting closer, he bent so his lips brushed her temple. “We are bound, you and I, in ways
nobody – not you, not even me – can ever fully understand. It’s why I took up the scepter. I know you don’t agree, but given the chance, I’d do it all again without hesitation. I would watch every last one of them burn again and again so long as it meant you were safe.”

Jane let out a shuddering breath, fingers curling into his tunic. “Loki…”

“Don’t,” he snapped, then again more gently, “don’t.” His brow was furrowed when he leaned back a bit, frustrated by the melancholy that must have been written across hers. “I’m not asking for your forgiveness, and I don’t want it. Just you.”

The warm breeze curled around them, but all the oxygen might as well have been displaced, impossible as it was to breathe in the wake of Loki’s confession. Jane’s thoughts were hot and fierce and bright, a lightning storm in the desert. She cupped the back of his neck, drawing him down to her, and when their lips met, she all but melted into the embrace.

He tasted like a secret or a sin, like every dark thought she’d ever had. Hidden away beneath Iðunn’s tree, veiled in the soft, sleepy colors of twilight, he kissed her like he was trying to steal the very breath from her lungs, and she let him devour her whole. She welcomed the warmth of his hands cradling her face and the smooth glide of his tongue against hers, the bark scraping her spine when he turned them towards the tree and the firm press of his hips as he pinned her to the trunk.

It was too much.

It wasn’t enough.

But not until her hands began to roam restlessly did he pull away to bury his face in her neck, mouth warm and wet against her skin.

“Jane?” he asked.

She nodded fervently, head thrown back against the tree, eyes fixed dazedly on the canopy overhead. “Yes. Please, yes, I—”

The orchard shifted around them. Grass and trees and the endless, midnight sky bled into one another as Loki carried her through the seams of space, and when the shadows solidified once more, they were back in his chambers.

Without even waiting for the chill of space-time to dissipate, Jane bounced up onto her tiptoes in a bid for Loki’s mouth. She needed to feel him, taste him. However, he didn’t reciprocate this time, remaining stubbornly out of reach as he held her at arm’s length. She looked up, brows pinched in concern, but he simply stared at her. Those grey-green eyes scanned her face, flitting from feature to feature, drinking her in to the point she felt naked under his scrutiny.

She’d seen that look before. In the years leading up to Ceylon, on the shattered end of the Rainbow Bridge, in the wilds of Jötunheim. It was the look of a man coming to terms with something, resigning himself to some unescapable fate, and for the briefest second, she suffered a sense of déjà vu so strong it had her tumbling into the past.

The wind was howling outside the cave while the fire crackled and popped. They were regarding each other through the flames, the question hanging in the air. *Have you ever been in love?* But the truth was bittersweet and she explained what fragmented pieces she remembered and Loki stared at her, through her, into her in a way only he could and—

Jane blinked and she was in his chambers once more. The heat of the moment still coursed through her, but it was more a smoldering fire now instead of an all-consuming blaze. Loki brushed the back
of his knuckles across her cheek, and when she leaned into the touch, he breathed out long and slow.

Resignation.

Acceptance.

Those were the emotions playing in the depths of his eyes as he took her hand and led her further into the room. The innate hunger she felt was mirrored there as well, but it was muted, overpowered by something she couldn’t quite place.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Loki guided her to stand between his legs. She rested her arms on his shoulders, all the while holding his hooded gaze. His thumbs lazily circled the jut of her hipbones before skimming over the swell of her hips, halfway down her legs, then back up again. He palmed her skin and leaned forward to nose her stomach.

It was a far cry from that morning or even earlier in the orchard. The desperate urgency was gone, replaced by a tenderness she’d rarely seen over the years. It made her burn in an entirely different way, and Jane carded her fingers through his hair before stooping to press her lips to the crown of his head.

Loki’s fingers twitched almost imperceptibly at her waist, breath warm through the fabric of her dress. Holding her steady with one hand, he unclasped her belt, then continued up to her shoulder where he eased off the single band of fabric holding her dress in place. The cool material ghosted over her body like water to pool at her feet.

“Beautiful,” Loki murmured when she stood nearly bare before him, and the desire in his voice made her shiver.

He moved slowly, leaving a line of kisses from the hollow between her breasts down to the waistband of her underwear. One finger traced back and forth along the elastic before dipping between her legs and oh.

Jane gasped at the rush, heady even separated by her underwear as they were, and her hands flew up to clutch hard and tight in his hair. The rhythmic motion he started up had her legs quivering, head falling back. He mouthed at her navel, teeth scraping deliciously across oversensitized skin, and she curled over him, pants loud in the otherwise silent room as he wound her up, drove her higher and higher. God, it had been so long. She wanted him so badly it hurt.

“Loki,” she whimpered, the edges of her thoughts beginning to blur white-hot.

But just when she felt herself nearing the precipice, he stopped.

A strangled sob tore from her throat, but Loki was already standing, lifting her with him, spinning to deposit her on the bed. Quivering, Jane shucked off her underwear and watched him undress from between her lashes. There was no magic, no instantaneous gratification, just the leisurely removal of his clothes. Their gazes were locked the whole time, and her heart raced in anticipation. It was beyond intimate.

Once Loki had tossed aside the last of his clothes, Jane eagerly received him. He kneeled over her and reversed his prior path, kissing back up her torso to her breasts. As he lathed at one nipple, she reached between them to where he hung hot and heavy, gave one experimental stroke, and breathed a sigh at the way his hips stuttered against her. He caught her nipple lightly between his teeth in response, and her sigh hitched into a groan, back arching.

“Please…” she begged. “Loki, please.”
He swallowed anything else she might have said. Without breaking the kiss, he scooted them further onto the bed and nudged her knees apart, settling between them. There was the fleeting impression of his fingers on her, then he was pressing in, filling all of her with himself, and everything went blank as the world sighed around them.

Yes.

At last.

_More._

Loki withdrew only to reseat himself, and Jane let loose a high, keening noise, hands fisting in the sheets. He was breathing as heavily as she, grating exhales puffing over her ear. His entire body trembled as he struggled for control. After so many years apart, neither of them would last long. Even still, she squirmed against him, yearning for him to move, to do something, _anything_—

His hips snapped to hers.

“Again,” Jane gasped out, and Loki complied, urgency returning to color his movements.

It was like a dam had broken. She was dragging her nails down his back and he was rocking into her and it was all passion and heat and want and oh, she’d missed this. All those years apart might as well have been nothing because everything was still there, the achingly familiar way they moved with one another, that completeness only he could provide.

“Look at me,” Loki said.

Jane opened her eyes. There was only a thin ring of the familiar grey-green anymore, his pupils blown wide, and he pressed his hands to the bed on either side of her twisting body, thrusting with abandon. With her eyes fixed on Loki’s expression, Jane surrendered to the rhythm, the rut. She let the thread snap until there was no going back, and as she bolted towards the edge, Loki lowered himself onto one elbow. His hand found hers, fingers twisting together. He invited her to leave everything behind, to follow him, to fly.

Jane gave in and lost ground.

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Moonlight filtered through the iron lattice, throwing indistinct patterns across one half of Loki’s face. Jane traced the shadows before sliding down to mold herself to his body, head tucked neatly under his chin, one arm thrown across his waist while the other remained trapped between them, hand on his chest. The cadence of his heartbeat kept time with the nightingale singing somewhere outside.

Lulled by the easy motion of his fingers up and down her spine, she sighed into the hollow of his neck and let her thoughts drift. It still amazed her, at times, how everything had come about. Never had she imagined her life turning out the way it had. Neither would she have imagined herself ending up with someone like Loki. And yet, she had.

Despite all his twisted edges and grey morals, he’d fit himself into her life, so close she couldn’t figure out how to remove him even if she wanted. There were a thousand reasons why she shouldn’t love him, but there were a thousand reasons more why she should.
“I love you,” she whispered into his skin.

Loki’s hand stilled.

It was the first time she’d ever uttered those words aloud to him, and her heart thumped a little harder. She didn’t regret it, though. She’d been holding back for too long as it was. After all this time, after everything they’d been through, he deserved to know how she felt.

For a minute, Jane thought he might ignore her, pretend he hadn’t heard or feign sleep altogether. Then he shifted, pulling away to prop his head up in one hand. The weight of his eyes on her was a tangible thing, and it took a few steadying breaths before she found the strength to meet his gaze.

She could track the progression of their relationship through the years. Some were good, some were bad, but they were all significant. Each one was an invisible line they’d crossed, leading them forward, guiding them towards something new and frightening and seemingly inevitable. Now Loki stared down at her, eyes intense and focused, and she knew this was another one of those moments. Another line crossed. Another point of no return.

Slowly, almost carefully, Loki slid a hand up her back, smoothed her hair, and cupped her face. “And I you,” he said softly, a promise. “Always.” Then he leaned over and pressed his lips to hers in a lingering kiss.

Jane snuggled back down against his chest when they separated. It was impossible to ignore reality, but just for a moment, she let it all go. There was no discord with the Asgardians, no threat looming on the horizon, no fear of death. Only them, wrapped up so tightly it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

She loved him, and he loved her.

Right then, that was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

The only real thing to mention this go round are the Élivágar Streams. Mythologically speaking, they’re rivers that existed in Ginnungagap at the beginning of the world and before the creating of the Nine Realms. The streams Freyja spoke of are water features in the royal gardens modeled after them.

But anywho, happy month of love! I appreciate each and every one of you so much. You motivate me, encourage me, and I can’t thank you enough <3

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