Summary

In matters of natural philosophy as well as in love, Marisa finds herself surprisingly distractable.

Notes

First of all, thank you to my wonderful betas from Yulechat: Measured Words helped me with some of the Yoruba cultural references, and thinkatory betaed for canonicity, spelling, and grammar. All remaining errors are mine alone.

Second, a disclaimer: Marisa Coulter is a fantastically flawed person raised in a very narrow-minded society. Her opinions in this fic do not necessarily reflect my own.

And finally, thank you, magisterequitum, for this prompt! It was going to be a lot shorter, but then Asriel walked in and the word count exploded. I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the work for more notes.

Marisa's daemon Ozymandias was one of the last in her class to settle, and she wasn't pleased with him at all. She wanted, more than anything, to be taken seriously, to be a real grown-up, only Ozymandias was holding her back.

Not that there hadn't been false alarms. He'd been a peacock for almost an entire week once, and
all the other girls at school had complimented his beautiful plumage. Only Marisa had known how long it had taken him to practice the form; how he'd craned his head this way and that in front of a mirror while she was practicing her Roman composition. Ozymandias was a vain thing, and Marisa loved that about him, but she wanted him to settle already.

She and Natalia had been good friends until two weeks ago, when her daemon Naphtali had settled. He was only a stupid collie, nothing to be jealous of, but Natalia had been bragging, and they'd had a row, and now Naphtali no longer seemed cowed by Ozymandias. It wasn't fair. Natalia was quieter and shyer than Marisa; she'd always done what Marisa wanted, but now, it seemed, Marisa'd lost her influence over the quiet girl -- over all the other girls, gradually, but Natalia stung the worst.

By the time they were on their way home for the Christmas holidays, though, Marisa and Natalia had made up, in a sense. Ozymandias still had not settled, though, and while Marisa and Natalia chatted and played cards and looked out the window of the zeppelin at the mountainous landscape below, Ozymandias sat as far as possible from Naphtali, his fox ears flat against his skull. Every now and then, his lips would peel back to reveal sharp teeth.

"...so I told Mother she absolutely had to take me to see it," Natalia was saying. She put down a Queen. "Because, after all, what are the holidays for? And she got us tickets to --''

Marisa laid down a King. "Rattlesnake!" they both cried at once, but Marisa was faster, so she took the pile.

Triumphant, Ozymandias became a hummingbird and did a lap around the gondola of the airship, over the heads of the businessmen in the next row, streaking under the arm of a stewardess pouring tea, and nearly knocking an old woman's hat from her head before perching on Marisa's shoulder. Out of the corner of her eye, Marisa saw Naphtali growl. She smiled coolly at Natalia.

"So," said Natalia, pointedly, "Mother said she'd got me tickets as a daemon-settling present. You can come along if you like." She smiled back at Marisa in a spiteful way.

Ozymandias became a golden-furred monkey, then, and leaped down from her shoulder to confront Naphtali, but suddenly the gondola of the zeppelin lurched, and the old woman behind Natalia shrieked, and tea spilled all over the businessmen.

There was another sickening lurch, and Marisa saw that the jagged peaks of the mountains below were far too close. Natalia screamed and pointed, at the far end of the gondola, where a flock of honking cliff-ghasts were flapping excitedly. Marisa had seen cliff-ghasts a few times from afar, but the airship routes were patrolled regularly, and the ghasts had learned to fear men with guns.

Marisa scooped Ozymandias into her arms for comfort, and he said, "They keep parachutes in the cabinets under the tables, don't they?"

"Oh!" Marisa hurried to lift up the top of their table, and pulled out four silken parachutes, folded and tied as neatly as if they were Christmas packages.

"But we can't!" said Natalia. "What about the cliff-ghasts?"

"Don't worry about the cliff-ghasts," snapped Marisa. "If the whole gondola comes lose, we've got to slow our fall somehow. Anyway, if I was a cliff-ghast, I'd prefer eating somebody with more meat on their bones." She nodded at the businessmen, who were both a bit portly.

Ozymandias, meanwhile, grabbed two of the parachutes as he swung down from her shoulder. He
fastened one to his own back -- he had always liked this form, if only for the thumbs -- then approached Naphtali. After several seconds of mutual glaring, Naphtali submitted to having a parachute strapped to his back, though he kept up a low, rumbling growl all the while.

After the stewardess reminded them of how to open their parachutes, they lined up to clamber out of the gondola one by one -- all but the old lady, who huddled with her parakeet daemon at one end of the gondola. "I've lived long enough," she insisted loudly, but her daemon was clearly agitated.

Natalia hesitated before jumping. She looked down, and gulped. Cliff-ghasts were already attacking the other passengers who'd leapt. Then she looked back at Marisa. Naphtali was whining and cringing close to her, his tail between his legs. "This is -- I mean -- I don't think --" she began.

"Oh, just go!" Marisa snapped, but she did not. Finally, Marisa rolled her eyes and pushed Natalia, suddenly. Yelping, Naphtali leaped after his human.

Taking a deep breath, she exchanged a look with Ozymandias, and together they leapt from the gondola and out into the cold white void.

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The going was harder than Marisa'd thought it would be. The crew of the airship had fought off the cliff-ghasts with guns, but soon after they'd reached the ground, the gondola had ripped free of the envelope entirely, and crashed to the ground. The envelope had drifted lazily away, but then burst into flames soon after that.

"That poor old woman," Natalia said, looking back for the third time in an hour. The crash site was no longer visible, so Marisa couldn't imagine what she was looking at.

"Keep up," she said. She was very cold, and she and Ozymandias were still clinging to each other, their teeth chattering. Her mind raced, trying to work out what would happen from here on out, and how they would survive. Because they had to survive, they simply had to. She wouldn't allow for any other possibility. Only she didn't see how unless something amazing happened.

"We ought to pray," said Naphtali, trotting through the snow, his ears pointed forward. "That's what we ought to do."

Marisa watched with irritation as Natalia dug out a rosary and began to mutter to herself. She didn't have one on her -- even her Bible was in her trunk with all her schoolbooks, and she'd left it on the zeppelin, so unless there had been some sort of miracle, it had burnt right up. Though she was not especially religious, she suddenly regretted not having thought of it. Perhaps the other passengers were being punished for Marisa's lack of interest, and she didn't want that.

"Don't be so ridiculous and self-centered," whispered Ozymandias. "...Though perhaps we ought to pray about something."

It was true. At the very least, Natalia was making her look bad, and just maybe it'd work. Marisa crossed herself, and muttered "Ave Maria, gratia plena..." She looked up at the sky, imploringly, and stopped.

There were witches flying above them. Some of them had bird daemons flying next to them, but others had none. Marisa knew from her lessons that the first witches had made pacts with the Devil, and signed their daemons away, and that was why witches didn't need daemons. Still, it was terribly unsettling to see firsthand. She stared as they landed beside the group, and after a few
minutes of whispered conversation that, try as they might, neither Marisa nor Natalia nor their daemons could hear without being terribly obvious eavesdroppers, the captain announced that the witches would guide the group through the mountains to the nearest village, which would hopefully have a telegraph.

"Oh no," said Natalia. "What do you think they're asking for?"

"What do you mean?" Marisa asked.

"Well, they're witches," said Natalia. "They must want something horrid. Like, a virgin's heart, or the captain's firstborn son."

"Ha," said Marisa, grinning. "I know what it is. They liked the looks of your daemon, so they're going to roast him up and eat him."

"Marisa!" Ozymandias hissed.

"Very funny," said Natalia coldly, but Naphtali whimpered and she put out a hand to comfort him.

"Oh, don't worry," said Marisa, feeling slightly guilty. "There's no such thing as roast daemon."

Natalia and Marisa hardly spoke until they got back to Brytain, though the warm anbaric light of civilization must have given Natalia back her sense of humor, because once she was home she laughed at the idea that they'd ever been in danger, and they were friends again. It was especially fortunate, because otherwise Marisa would have had a dreadful time at the theater with Natalia and her parents.

During the intermission, she and Natalia made terrible fun of the witches in the play -- they would have been delightfully spooky if only the two girls hadn't seen the real thing so recently, but for now Marisa saw them as they truly were. One had a little sparrow-daemon covered in soot perched upon her shoulder pretending to be a crow, and the other two actresses were pretending to be daemonless, although they never moved very far from the prop cauldron, and when the lights went dark, they bent to scoop their daemons out of it. The worst part, though, was when one of the witches came out with a dreadful stuffed owl on her shoulder, and spoke to it as though it was her soul.

"It's too bad, though," said Natalia. "I think it'd be a scary scene if she just had the right sort of daemon. But not everybody's daemon can settle as something suitable for the role, I suppose. And goodness knows they must settle sometime." She scratched Naphtali behind the ear.

Marisa found that she was no longer irritated by Natalia's constant bragging. She smiled coolly at Ozymandias, who gave her a toothy monkey grin right back -- for he had not changed since they'd leapt from the airship, and she doubted if he ever would again.

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After the incident with the zeppelin, Natalia had been rather skittish about travel generally, but Marisa had taken every opportunity to go to new places. She'd even tried one year to convince her parents once to holiday in the north, so that she could see more witches, but of course she could never admit her reasoning to them or they'd think something was wrong with her -- because what genteel young lady wanted to have anything to do with witches? -- so eventually she left off begging, and went along with them to France and Rome and Svizra, and all the other places that would make her seem sophisticated and charming, but not too outré.

But she made as much of these trips as she could, staid as they were. In Nice, she visited an
archaeological dig, which was at the time the subject of a great controversy in experimental theology circles. In Rome, she took in the remains of the cathedrals the Popes had built before the end of the papacy, and after filling out a great deal of paperwork and writing a very dull personal essay on the meaning of faith, she was also given a permit to see the even more ancient and more heretical pagan statues. And in Geneva she saw the seat of the Magisterium, and it awed her, just as she had hoped it would.

When her parents let her pick her own destinations for her year's tour of the world, though, she got rather more adventurous. She travelled to Sveden in the summer, where she'd heard the Taymyr witch-clan gathered yearly, and charmed a witch-queen's son into bringing her to one of the witches' strange, wild celebrations. Though they were alien, and often haughty, Marisa felt an odd kinship with the witches, for when society told them not to do something, they tilted their heads and asked why, or scoffed.

She went to Bharat in the fall, for she'd heard many inflated stories about wise men who could separate themselves from their daemons and climb ropes into the sky and disappear into other worlds. She learned no such secrets, but she did learn that there might be some truth to one in ten fantastic legends, and decided that she must track these truths down someday, when she had more than a few months and her parents' dwindling allowance.

And she'd intended to spend the winter travelling through Afric, but things got in the way. She was in the French colony of Algerie, where the Church was strong and the soil was fertile, and where her parents had friends -- a couple called Augustin, who owned a fig plantation and a small vineyard.

One day, as they walked between the tidy lines of trees, she complimented Monsieur Augustin on the obedience and diligence of his workers, who she had seen only from a distance, but who appeared to require neither guards nor supervisors. "Ah. Yes," he said, looking strangely shaken by the compliment. And he did not elaborate, though his heron daemon hunched her long neck into her body so that it looked like she was hiding.

Later that afternoon, Marisa realized why when she went out on her own. She crossed herself when she realized what she was seeing, and then she stared in horrified fascination, because the men -- were they men, or walking corpses? -- did not have daemons.

She wanted to know how such a thing could be -- because it was so horrible, her mind could not let it go, and possibilities flitted back and forth between her and Ozymandias.

"Perhaps they're wicked criminals, and their daemons ran away from them," she said.

"Don't be ridiculous, that would never happen," said Ozymandias. "If they were wicked, their daemon would be just as awful. Perhaps the men are witches, and their daemons are elsewhere."

"If they were witches, they wouldn't be so obedient," said Marisa. "They'd do whatever they pleased whenever they liked. One must have strong will to be a witch, I think." Marisa sometimes wished she'd been born a witch, for all that she enjoyed the comforts of her current life, and even though she knew she would be lost without the guidance of the Church. "Perhaps they are wicked criminals, though, and their daemons were killed as punishment."

"Or perhaps," said a cold female voice behind her, "they are somebody's brothers and husbands and fathers, and they have been abducted to work in some rich man's fig fields until they die of exhaustion." Marisa felt the barrel of a gun against her back, and swallowed. How would she get out of this? Surely this was the problem with having such obedient workers that one needed no guards; anybody could just wander in and abduct one's guests.
"Hello," said Marisa. Her voice was steady, but Ozymandias was wringing his little black hands in agitation, and she mentally told him to stop or he'd give their nervousness away. "It's abominably rude of you to barge onto somebody else's property like this, but putting that aside for the moment, would it be all right if I turned around?"

"Yes, but put your daemon down, and keep your hands up," said the unseen woman, and Marisa did as she said -- slowly, for she did not want to be shot. Her assailant was a tall African woman in a white cap and a blue and white striped dress, with a large knife and a club at her belt. Her daemon was a leopard-spotted wild dog with pointed bat ears, and as soon as she'd put Ozymandias down, it had seized his neck in its teeth, so that Marisa didn't dare run.

The woman had three companions, all dressed and equipped alike, and Marisa realized, belatedly, that they were wearing uniforms, and that these must be the Amazons of Danxome. These women were well-known in Brytain, for France had attempted several times to invade their homeland, the Empire of Danxome, in Western Afric, to no avail. The papers in London were full of cartoons of Frenchmen fleeing from African women in long skirts and heavy earrings. But these women looked competent and well-armed, and Marisa wished suddenly that she had taken her parents' dull advice and gone back to Geneva.

"Are you going to behead me?" she asked them.

The woman with the rifle scoffed. "Behead an unarmed prisoner? Don't be ridiculous." She turned to one of the other women. "Are they ready?" she asked.

"Abla, we only have two," said one of her fellow soldiers. She carried a shallow cedar box. "No one said anything about a daughter."

"I'm not their daughter!" Marisa said quickly. "You must see that I'm English. Besides, I hardly even know these people," she added, although of course they'd told her she could stay as long as she liked. "I was taking a walk in the countryside, and --"

"We have already captured her," said Abla, cutting off her lie about climbing the wall to steal figs. "If we need to kill her, we can do it here. And they're not workers," she told Marisa. "They're zombis. They have been enslaved. Their daemons are somewhere else, forcibly separated, and probably kept locked up by the people who own this place. We have come to take them back -- to free all the zombis of Algerie. Will you stand in our way?" she asked.

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Marisa, because the woman's daemon had Ozymandias by the throat, and she could feel its teeth on his throat as if it were her throat, and Ozymandias was trembling now.

"Good. You would be sorry if you had," said Abla. She turned to her companion with the boxes. "Well? Release them and follow them."

The woman with the box nodded. She opened the box, and two strange metal bugs flew out with an angry buzz. One took off toward the house, and the other flew over the fig trees towards where Marisa knew Monsieur Augustin was; one soldier took off after each bug, following them as quickly and quietly as possible.

After that, everything moved very quickly. The Amazons returned with the groggy, near-paralyzed Augustins in tow. The women from Danxome then had a very heated argument about what to do with their prisoners; one woman, whose father had been captured and enslaved, wished desperately to kill the Augustins, but Abla's daemon let out a long, low growl, and Abla said that they had their orders, and the argument was finished. But during the argument, Marisa had started to slip away,
and this was a mistake, for Abla brought the butt of her rifle down on her head, and she knew no more.

When she awoke, the Augustins were recovered, and Madame Augustin was tutting over the lump on Marisa's head with a cloth full of ice. And all of the workers, as well as the soldiers from Danxome, had vanished.

The next day it was all over the newspapers and the marconi; plantations across the colony had been invaded, and their workers stolen away, although the newspapers put it quite differently -- *ils sont enlevée*, they have been kidnapped. Madame Augustin complimented Marisa's bravery that morning at breakfast, and Monsieur Augustin apologized profusely for the fright and promised to engage guards once he found new workers.

But the one thing Marisa wanted to know most -- the one thing she dared not ask -- was not mentioned anywhere, by anyone. Why were these men without daemons? Had Marisa simply been unobservant? Or were they truly *zombis*, as Abla had said? The question stayed with her when she returned home, even as she worried that she might never travel again, and applied herself to more conventional tasks, like finding a husband.

* * *

Edward Coulter was not, technically, a handsome man, but Marisa did not care. He was a short man, with dark, cheerful eyes and a warm smile that was slightly too clever for politics. It was his smile that made her grin back, always. She also liked the way he managed to draw the eyes of everyone in the room when he got up to speak; the way people turned and stared expectantly if they'd heard him before, and the way people who'd never heard him speak at all would pause in surprise, then listen, then nod appreciatively. He had an excellent voice, and an excellent way of using it. His opinions were commonsense ones. Not everyone shared them, certainly, but they sat well within the boundaries defined by the Magisterium and the king. When he spoke, though, they sounded so grand and glorious that people got all excited about things they already believed, and often started to think they'd always believed certain new things, even if they'd voted for the other fellow last time around.

She had met him at a rather exclusive soiree, which she'd only been invited to because Natalia's parents were throwing it. She'd gathered a small crowd about her as she was telling the thrilling tale of her encounter with the soldiers from Danxome, although rather embellished, and she was just getting to the part where Ozymandias had heroically knocked the Amazon general's gun away from a little crying child, when she looked up and there he was, with his chameleon daemon on his shoulder. He was clearly fascinated, yes, but also amused, and he plainly didn't believe a word of it. She decided that perhaps he was more perceptive than most, so she kept an eye on him and saw that he fascinated people, and that she could learn from him if he became an ally.

Somewhere along the line, she found that she also rather liked him, and that she could even laugh at his stupidest jokes. One of the surest ways to charm men at parties, Marisa had found, was to laugh at their jokes, but when she laughed at Mr. Coulter's, she found she was alarmingly sincere.

She'd had her share of flirtations before, of course -- poor dear Natalia listened to her tales of travel and the men she'd met along the way, and lived vicariously through them, even as she said "Oh, you shouldn't have done that!" and "But what would your parents think?" and sometimes, with shocked giggles, just *Marisa! How could you?* But Marisa found herself grateful that Mr. Coulter could never find out about these things, because he was a serious man, and pious, and what *would* he think of her?

And so one thing led to another, and as she charmed Edward Coulter with tales of her travels, and
he explained to her about the importance of the Church's involvement in good and responsible
government, and as they found they agreed upon the benefits and pitfalls of educating women,
Marisa wondered if perhaps this was love.

She wondered this, right up until Edward got down on one knee and proposed in a restaurant in
Paris, and she realized that it probably wasn't love when her reaction was Oh! Well. I had better
say yes, what else can I do? and a strange regret that they couldn't simply go on as they had been,
and not the explosion of joy that she thought she would feel. But she was fonder of him than most,
and they had similar goals, and that would almost certainly be enough.

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It wasn't enough, Marisa realized. She had been married to Edward for five years, and had been
throwing herself desperately into experimental theology at St. Sophia's for three of those years,
when she realized that she was not happy.

Not that experimental theology wasn't fascinating, but Marisa had initially wanted to follow
Edward into politics. He pointed out, though, that it would look a bit silly, wouldn't it? Politics
was no place for a woman. There were occasionally women who spoke out in favor of this or that,
and once or twice some town or another had got a spot in the national newspapers for having taken
leave of their senses and electing a lady mayor. But really, Edward was right; such women made
spectacles of themselves and never accomplished much. Experimental theology, though, was
noble. It was for the pure of heart and the lofty of purpose, and Marisa wanted very much to be
both of these things, though she failed utterly.

No, it was not her course of study that was causing her pain. It was the way Edward smiled at her.
She'd thought it was charming at first, that dismissive little smirk he gave when she was
embellishing a story more than was necessary, only now it wasn't because she was lying, but
because she thought he might care what she was saying. He gave her the same smile whether she
was discussing a new dress she had bought, or an experiment she and the others at St. Sophie's had
run, or even when she said what she'd thought of his latest act as Minister for Public Morality and
it was absolutely infuriating.

And then there were her school friends. Oh, Natalia was all right -- ever-loyal, sad, simpering
Natalia with her dog daemon and her dull fiancé, but the others -- Zoe and Arista and Vivienne --
seemed to talk of nothing but Edward. They had heard his speech on the marconi, or they had seen
a photogram of him in the paper, and they wanted to know if she had met so-and-so along with
him, and they would badger him until she snapped "Good Lord, I'm his wife, not his daemon."

They certainly hadn't cared much for him before, when she was engaged -- how could Marisa
marry someone so ugly, so dull, of such low birth? But once he became the Minister for Public
Morality, they were interested again, because there he was in the paper being funny and
convincing and very slightly shocking, and not like the old Minister he'd replaced.

Heaven help women whose husbands were fashionable.

To be fair, he was probably the most cheerfully human Minister for Public Morality in living
memory, and certainly the only one with a sense of humor -- and he was often comparatively
liberal. The College of Bishops often made statements to the effect that if he continued down this
road much further, he might well find himself in the midst of grave sins. They especially disliked
Marisa, though she could not name a single thing she'd done to earn their ire except to be beautiful,
and married to a man who liked to show her off.

And then there were her fellow students. The problem with St. Sophia's was that nobody took it
seriously; its students were women, so its students must not be terribly competent. There were jokes about St. Sophia's students failing to grasp history or calculus. And the most painful thing about this, to Marisa's eyes, was that it was... almost true. The women of St. Sophia's weren't stupid, but none of them liked her jokes, and a few of them had taken an instant dislike to her for (as far as Marisa was concerned) the same reasons the College of Bishops had, which was to say, no good reason at all. Still, Dame Agatha, who was one of her advisors, seemed to find her theological arguments well-reasoned and her grasp of natural philosophy sound, and Marisa found herself spending more and more time at Oxford, not because she was especially passionate about natural theology, but because she had lost interest in almost everything else.

It was not surprising, then, that the particular serpent who tempted her took the form of a man from Jordan College, St. Sophia's rival in experimental theology. His name was Asriel, and he was nothing like her husband, and Marisa found him fascinating.

She met him at a party. It wasn't actually a very good party; the wine had lost its bubble and the cheese was stale, and it was full of experimental theologians. Sober experimental theologians. Dame Agatha and Dame Hannah had convinced her to come -- Marisa suspected they only wanted her to lend a little glamour to the party -- but she had, in turn, failed to convince Edward to come, and now, somehow, she was standing in the middle of a cluster of grey-haired men, who were having a Very Important Debate about the mechanism by which Pavel Khunrath's alethiometers worked, and how Rusakov particles came to be able to move needles around a dial. Every time she spoke, they looked anxiously at her, paying rapt attention, and then went on as though she hadn't said a thing. Dame Hannah had caught her eye in sympathy once or twice -- she was a skilled alethiometerist, but it was of no consequence in the present company.

Then one of the immense wooden doors opened, and a man walked in. He was emphatically not dressed for a party of any sort; his shirt was wrinkled and dirty, and his trousers were of elephant cord. He clearly had not shaved for several days, and there was a large nick on his cheek that suggested the last time he had, he hadn't been looking into a mirror.

The man handed his filthy fur coat to a butler and grabbed a canapé from a passing tray. "Sorry I'm late," he said cheerfully. His snow leopard daemon looked coolly about the room. "What have I missed? My invitation didn't arrive, by the way -- the post isn't very timely in Muscovy. I shall have a word or two with the Tsar next time I'm there."

Marisa assumed he'd be thrown out on his ear, and was getting ready to find that disappointing, when one of the scholars greeted him by name. "Asriel! Welcome back!" said Percival Trelawney, coming forward to shake his hand heartily. "You all remember Asriel, don't you? Oh! I suppose he was before your time, Mrs. Coulter," said Trelawney, deferentially. "Mrs. Coulter, Lord Asriel Belacqua, late of regions north. Asriel, this lovely lady is Marisa Coulter, the wife of our esteemed Minister for Public Morality."

"That old goat has a wife?" Lord Asriel asked, astonished.

"Apparently he has," said Marisa, with a pitiless edge to her voice.

"Ah," said Trelawney, his face falling slightly. "Ah, Asriel has been away for quite some time -- perhaps he hasn't had much news -- you might be thinking of the previous Minister for Public Morality, Mr. Stanwick."

"Mr. Stanwick was married too," said Marisa. "I believe that was ultimately his undoing, was it not?"

"Well," said Trelawney, flustered.
Asriel raised an eyebrow. "What happened with Stanwick? I must know."

"He had an affair," said Marisa simply.

"Well, a man needs to know he's alive, doesn't he?" Asriel asked.

Trelawney looked horrified. "It's not really suitable for --"

"With his wife's brother," said Marisa. It had been particularly shocking to the press, because the man's daemon was a drab little female cardinal, a sensible and proper and (though they did not say it in so many words) a heterosexual sort of daemon.

Asriel laughed. "So they decided to appoint a new old goat, with demonstrably superior taste in women? Makes sense." His daemon looked at him as though she wanted to say something, but instead, her tail twitched and she sat, watching Marisa and Ozymandias with expectant eyes.

There was a time Marisa would have blushed at these words, and Asriel was a handsome man, but she smiled as if she got such compliments all the time -- which, nowadays, she did, along with plenty of backbiting and whispering, of course -- and took a sip of her flat champagne, looking him in the eye. "I like to think I'm the one with superior taste in men, Lord Asriel."

This got a laugh from Asriel. "And why has this superior man sent his wife to spy on Oxford's Scholars, instead of coming himself, then?"

It was her turn to laugh, because he really was clueless, wasn't he? "I'm an under-Scholar at St. Sophia's. They let women study theology too now, you know. Edward didn't just marry me to look good in photograms." She smiled. "At any rate, you interrupted a fascinating discussion of alethiometry and its mechanisms; I believe Dame Hannah has some insights which would serve these gentlemen well? We were speaking of anbaric charge."

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Lord Asriel showed up often after that, usually when Marisa had important things to do and didn't have time to deal with a nobleman with delusions of either usefulness or intellectual superiority, or whatever it was about him that irritated her so. Often, she would find herself writing down the Bliss letters for books she needed for her research in the card catalogue, only to find that most of the books had already been taken from the shelves. When this happened, she usually found Asriel sitting at a table, absorbed in taking notes from one of the books she needed, his leopard daemon curled up at his feet.

In fact, once she'd noticed him doing this, she started to sit and read at the library herself, rather than taking the books back to the comfortable townhouse where she and Edward lived, or to the theology laboratory where she had the companionship of the other women in her research group. She didn't have to look up to see him -- she felt the prickle of recognition when Ozymandias noticed him there. One thing led to another, and soon they were often to be found sitting in companionable silence; her poring over tables of figures of anbaric charge and molecular weights and statistical data on daemons, and him looking for grains of truth in seemingly-nonsensical pagan stories and examining maps carefully.

Experimental theology was a wide-ranging field by necessity, as its ultimate aim was to describe how the entire universe worked, but even taking this into account, Marisa often had trouble understanding how Asriel's studies connected at all. She asked him one day while he was making notes on a collection of African tales and comparing it to wild descriptions of unusual medical issues made in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, which in turn caused him to dig out old
volumes of the *Journal of Daemonological Medicine*.

"One wonders," said Marisa, "what sort of experiments, exactly, you think this line of research will lead to."

He looked up from his notes and grinned at her. "That is a complicated question, but one I was hoping you might help me answer." She raised an eyebrow at this. "I'm having a spot of trouble getting an approval stamp, you see."

"That doesn't surprise me," said Marisa. "Nobody sensible would approve of you." It was true enough; if his entrance at the party wasn't bad enough, he kept flirting with her, and being funny and clever and interesting.

He grinned at her, as if he'd got a marvelous joke he'd just made. "It's one of your husband's little minions, actually."

"My husband hasn't got minions," said Marisa.

"Well, he ought to! What sort of a man has no minions?" Asriel asked. "Even I have minions. I secured them as soon as I could afford them, and I've never regretted it."

"You talk about Edward as if he's a villain out of the vilest sort of pulp adventure," said Marisa. "I assure you, he is not so glamorous as all that. He only has employees -- and so have you, unless you aspire to pulp villainy as well?"

She knew, on some level, that she should just stop talking to him. She found herself thinking that she ought to have picked up her things and stopped talking to Asriel several minutes ago, because she was right, nobody sensible would approve of him. But she wanted to see what would happen if she kept going the way she was going. It felt like a grand and delightful experiment.

It was not, after all, as if she was having an affair with Asriel. He was simply a friend. An arrogant, charming, frustrating, clever friend -- one who kept flirting with her, but here they were talking about her husband, so of course nothing would happen. Of course.

"My dear Mrs. Coulter," said Asriel, "I aspire to much greater villainy than that. But in that case, one of your husband's employees is standing in the way of my research, and I was hoping you could make an introduction."

And that settled it. If Asriel's intentions had been dishonorable, he would never have thought to ask for this. Marisa tried not to find that disappointing. She realized that she'd found Asriel's apparent interest thrilling -- it was as if she was a zeppelin pilot seeing how close she could skim next to buildings, all the while knowing that if she went too far and the envelope snagged, her entire life would burst into flames.

But she could make the introduction. What was the use of being a politician's wife if you couldn't do things for your friends, after all? And she could not help thinking it would serve her theological career well to become better-acquainted with Asriel. He'd come back from the North newly wealthy, and what he had let her see of his ideas were highly unconventional and terribly intriguing. He certainly wasn't afraid to get things done.

Ozymandias whispered into her ear, "Marisa, this is a bad idea. We should find out exactly what's in it for us."

He would owe her for this, though, and that was reason enough for her. She ignored Ozymandias, smiled, and said, "We're having supper tomorrow night with some old friends, as a matter of fact."
Would you like to join us?"

And so it was settled, and soon Marisa was introducing Asriel to Edward and to their other guests. One of Edward's old school friends was there -- now a bishop -- and a few colleagues of his from the Ministry of Public Morality with their wives, and Natalia and her husband Robert. Edward made a good-natured quip about his beautiful wife bringing home strange men, and everybody laughed, and soon the men were discussing a government proposal regulating appropriate subjects for stage plays as if they were all old friends.

Marisa didn't know why she was so relieved to have got away with something, for she had very plainly done nothing wrong. But every now and then Asriel caught her eye and grinned, and she couldn't help but grin back, until eventually, once, she felt Natalia's sharp elbow in her ribs.

"Ow! What?" she asked.

"What are you doing?" Natalia whispered, after looking to be certain their conversation would not be overheard.

"What do you mean, what am I doing?" Marisa asked. "I'm hosting a party, what does it look like?"

"What are you doing introducing your husband to the man you're having an affair with?" she demanded, so quietly Marisa had to strain to make out the syllables.

"I'm not having an affair with anyone!" Marisa whispered back. "Asriel and I are colleagues. Work colleagues. Platonic work colleagues."

Natalia sighed, looking oddly disappointed. Then she said, "All right, then. What are you working on together?"

"Well, nothing at the moment," said Marisa, "but that doesn't mean--"

"What is he working on, then?" she asked.

"Oh, you won't understand it," said Marisa.

"Right, because I'm a dim little mouse," said Natalia, smiling in a surprisingly unkind way. "Tell me about it anyway. Humor me. Impress me with your intellect."

"Well, he's working on--he's--I--" Marisa realized, with irritation, that she had never actually managed to get a straight answer out of Asriel -- it was always "There's some interesting data on anbaromagnetism here," or "Surprising how many mad stories turn out to be true," and nothing remotely concrete. His cheerful willingness to share and maddening lack of specificity had somehow always been cleverly hidden behind the gentleman adventurer and natural philosopher persona he affected.

Natalia's eyebrows went up. "Well? I'm waiting. Do tell."

Marisa thought back to the sort of books he'd been reading. "It's an investigation into how anbaromagnetic forces affect daemons according to their distance from the magnetic poles of the Earth," she invented, although this was patent nonsense. As far as Marisa knew, there was no difference in how the daemon-human bond behaved in Svalbard or Danxome. On the other hand, nobody had really investigated the daemon-human bond that closely, so she supposed there might be minor differences. She wondered what sort of units one would even measure such things in, and realized that even though she had an elementary grasp of daemonology, this was a field most of the
St. Sophia's lecturers studiously avoided.

That was very interesting. Perhaps that was what Asriel wanted to learn. Perhaps it was why he was having trouble getting his paperwork stamped. She resolved to ask Edward about it in a roundabout fashion later, sometime when he was comfortably, cheerfully drunk and possessed of the urge to ramble at his wife about things she already understood.

"What's got you grinning now?" Natalia asked, accusatorily.

"I just thought of something, that's all," said Marisa.

Generally, at these parties, the men would go off into one room to gasbag and the wives would stay in the dining room to gossip, and Marisa didn't feel quite at ease in either room. Today, however, she made a point of bringing tea and biscuits in for the men -- with something a bit stronger for Asriel -- after they were deep in conversation, pouring the tea, then sitting in a quiet corner of the room and reading quietly. She'd heard that witches possessed the ability to become invisible simply by making themselves uninteresting, but of course, she'd never seen it in action, and until now had never thought to imitate it.

It didn't work for her.

"Marisa," said Edward, "what are you doing over there? Come over here and chat!" His chameleon daemon, Theodora, was curled up on his shoulder in her usual place.

"Now if we could just deal with the witch problem," Robert was saying, gesticulating with his cigar, "we could easily --"

"Witch problem?" Marisa asked. Robert worked in cargo shipping for large mining companies like Larsen Manganese.

"Which is to say, which witch problem?" Asriel asked, with a smirk.

Marisa shot him a look.

"Marisa has actually met witches, haven't you, my dear?" said Edward, putting his arm around her comfortably.

"Barely," said Marisa. "They're not terribly keen on outsiders."

"Do you really think so?" Asriel asked. "I've always found them quite warm and welcoming." From his expression, he did not appear -- strictly speaking -- to be discussing their attitudes. Edward laughed, and Robert flushed

Sebastian, the bishop, clucked his tongue. "Most improper. The essence of witchery is, of course, the unnatural woman."

"Do you really think so?" Marisa asked, sipping at her tea. "In that I feel they'd disagree quite strongly with you."

"Marisa admires the witches," said Edward, with a little laugh. "She has always found them fascinating."

"Oh no, I don't admire them," said Marisa, quickly. "But they do intrigue me. Did Natalia ever tell you about our zeppelin accident, Robert?" she asked. "It was when we were in school, on the way home for the Christmas hols."
"Yes," said Robert, giving her a stern sort of look -- the kind that suggested his wife's version of the tale did not flatter Marisa.

"At any rate, those witches saved our lives," said Marisa. "I can't be blamed for finding them interesting."

"And that is their very danger," said Sebastian.

Marisa raised an eyebrow; he wasn't normally one of those fire-and-brimstone sorts. "Really?" she asked.

"Yes, exactly," said Sebastian. "It is the witch's mission -- her goal in life -- to lead women into sin -- kind, sweet, lovely women like yourself, Mrs. Coulter, and like, I am certain, all these gentlemen's wives. The witch, you see, is descended from Lilith, and though she has a daemon and her form is human enough, she does not know God. Everything about her is an affront to goodness and to nature. She does not feel the cold air, in order to better lead men into sin. She makes war, as women ought not do. She knows hidden, evil things and consorts with the devil. She is an abysmal mother, rarely staying with the man she mates with even if she pretends to wed him. Even Gravity and Death shun her, and want nothing to do with her."

"I quite agree," said Asriel, and Marisa nearly spat out her mouthful of tea, because she couldn't imagine what was coming, but it wouldn't be good. "Half-naked immortal flying women are just plain wrong. Especially when they can fight. The brazenness of that, well."

Edward laughed hard. "I like this fellow, Marisa," he said. "He has nerve. That or he's mad."

"The doctors tell me it's a little bit of both," said Asriel, cheerfully, "but don't worry, it's not catching."

Sebastian looked from Asriel to Edward with distaste. "Witches are no laughing matter," he said.

"Oh, lighten up a bit, Sebastian," said Edward. "It was only a little joke. I'm certain Lord Belacqua understands well. At any rate, Robert, you were discussing the witch problem in shipping."

"I must say, I heartily agree with the good bishop," said Robert. "The women are a damned nuisance to the business -- a literal damned nuisance if you'll excuse my language."

"But what have witches to do with minerals?" Marisa asked.

"Oh, a great deal," said Robert, rolling his eyes. "They are always making trouble, you see. This mine or that oil reserve is in some sacred place, or they must not have mining going on for fear of disturbing the growth of the lichens or the seals or some nonsense."

"The lichens?" Edward asked. "Good gracious, what sort of wild beast is that?"

"Some sort of moss, or mushroom, or something," said Robert, waving his hand disgustedly.

"A little bit of both, actually, but you're close," said Asriel.

"I had no idea wildlife came under the umbrella of experimental theology," said Sebastian, haughtily.

"Oh, but of course it does," said Marisa. "Theology describes and embraces all of natural philosophy, from astronomy to zoology. Besides, Lord Asriel has recently returned from an expedition to the north, and if I'm not mistaken, he plans on going back."
Robert scoffed. "Nerve or madness, did you say, Edward? I'm quite content to manage shipping from the London offices, thank you very much. Give me a map and accurate schedules and a decent cup of tea over the hands-on approach."

"Yes, well, as natural philosophers, we must resort to the hands-on approach," said Asriel. "Particles do not distribute accurate schedules by themselves."

"Yes, largely our work involves trying to coax them into it," said Marisa.

Edward put his arm around her again in what Marisa was beginning to think of as a territorial gesture. "Then you must make a fine experimental theologian," he told her. "She can be very convincing, gentlemen. I know firsthand." His fingers surreptitiously brushed Ozymandias's golden fur as he pulled away -- a light touch, but a very intentional one -- and she shivered a bit, before recovering her adoring wifely smile. It did not feel wrong, but it did not quite feel right anymore either, and all Marisa could do about it now was to carry on pretending.

So she smiled, and the others rolled their eyes a bit, and then Robert said, "So you've been North, then? What on earth would make you go back?"

"Well," said Asriel, "it's a bit complicated to explain to the layperson--"

"As if we haven't heard that one before," said Clarence, one of Edward's coworkers. "Was talking to a playwright the other day, he's all metaphors this, symbolism that, and I say to him, look, it's very clear in the guidelines, no retellings of Faust where he gets away with it. But you boffins are near as bad as the creative types, really."

"Really, what is the point of experimental theology," said Robert, "if you lot can't explain it to the rest of us?"

"-- but," said Asriel, continuing as if no one had said anything, "in essence, I hope to find a nice quiet place to listen to the marconi," he said.

They all stared at him. Even Marisa stared. She had no idea what Asriel was getting at.

Finally, Clarence spoke. "What, have they got better programming in the North?"

"Hardly any," said Asriel. "I want to listen to the static."

"The static?" Robert asked asked, and it suddenly clicked for Marisa.

"Yes," said Asriel. "You see, I have a theory. A very delightful, mad, wild theory, which is after all the essence of experimental theology. I think it's possible that the static you hear on the marconi is the sound of Creation itself -- the whispering voice of God's Word."

Marisa understood, suddenly, some of the things Asriel had been looking at -- some of the facts and figures now made much more sense -- and she thought one of the others at St. Sophia's was working on this very thing, although she had never been quite so bold as to say so. She had to keep from grinning, but Ozymandias made a little noise of simian glee which would have given her away to anyone observant. At least, if anybody had been looking at her, but -- most uncharacteristically -- they were all staring at Asriel, who seemed very pleased by the attention.

"I think there's a fellow in Piccadilly Circus with an aye-aye daemon and a sign who says the same thing," said Clarence, finally. "You two might get on. Only you'd better hurry, he says the end is nigh."
"It makes sense, though," said Marisa, surprising herself slightly, and the astonished faces turned towards her, and now she had to hold her own. Which she could do. As Edward said, she could be very convincing. "You've got a sound -- a consistent background noise -- which as everybody who's tried to hear the news better on their marconi knows is everywhere, absolutely everywhere, and it can't be eliminated or extinguished, no matter how we try. We know it's coming from space --"

"From the stars, Mrs. Coulter, really?" said Sebastian. "There is an old heresy that claims --"

"Not from the stars," said Asriel, with disgust. "They give off their own signals." Obviously, he seemed to want to add. "But John 1:1 says it plain as day -- 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' I want to listen to the Word of God, and to do so, I must go North and hide myself away from the broadcasts of this sinful world. I want to sift through the echoes of that Word, and pinpoint the place in the heavens from which He spoke it. I ask you, is there any nobler a pursuit?"

Marisa would have laughed at him if he'd said this to her in private, for Asriel would have made a wretched holy hermit. His remarks on the subject of witches would have confirmed as much, even if she'd never met him before. But she could not help admiring how he had explained his theory, and couched it in poetry and metaphor and made it sound harmlessly pious. The only thing that ruined it a bit was how obviously rehearsed his little speech had been.

But even Sebastian was having trouble finding anything suspicious and contrary in Asriel's motivations. "I -- well. That would certainly be a demonstration of the truth of God. If you could do it," he added, slightly peevishly.

"That is, alas, the real question," said Asriel. "I've no doubt I could gain insight into the truth of the matter if I could only obtain the proper paperwork, but would you believe it, I've been having some trouble with the Ministry of Public Morality."

Edward raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?" He tsked. "Bastard who runs that place ought to be sacked, haven't I been saying that for years?"

"Edward, we did sack him," Clarence reminded him. "You're the Minister for Public Morality."

"So I am!" said Edward, cheerfully. Marisa wondered if perhaps she'd put too much poppy straw in his tea. She had originally planned only to dose Asriel, who seemed to be in fine form at the moment, and who had told her all she wanted to know for now. But she had, on a whim, decided to give Edward some poppy as well, because what was the use of finding out Asriel's plans if Edward flatly denied him approval? But he was beaming and smiling, and generally very taken with the idea of rendering Asriel assistance, so Marisa couldn't regret it.

Still, things worked out in the end. Asriel explained the specifics of the bureaucratic issues he was having, and Edward vowed to pull a few strings.

Later, when Edward and Sebastian -- now slightly intoxicated, and therefore much more fun -- were regaling Robert and Clarence with tales of schoolboy mischief, Asriel turned to Marisa, and said, quietly, 'I'd hate to criticize a lady's housekeeping skills, especially as a guest, but there was a bit too much opium in my tea. Next time, I'd prefer sugar. Just one lump." He smiled. And before she could respond, he said, "Well, boys, Mrs. Coulter, I must be off! Lovely party, thank you so much for having me." And he was gone.

* * *
She was in the laboratory one afternoon, trying to get a broken magnetograph to work again -- Marisa had a strange and unladylike knack for mechanical things -- when she saw Asriel again.

"I don't think that's how you're supposed to use those," he whispered over her shoulder. "Delicate instruments, aren't they?"

He was standing very close to her, and she swallowed as she felt the snow leopard brush against Ozymandias playfully. "What is this, a magnetograph?" he asked, as if he was only curious.

"Here," he said, reaching around her to take the machine from her. "Let me help." She could feel his breath on her neck, and the warmth of his body behind her.

She thanked God that she was elbow-deep in the magnetograph right now, because the lab was empty and it occurred to her, in a flash, that what she wanted to do to Asriel required both of her hands, the extensive use of her mouth, and exactly no morals.

"Asriel," she said. It came out breathier than she'd meant it to. "Asriel," she tried again, "you are not helping. If you don't step away from me this instant I'm going to hit you with this wrench the moment I get out of -- out of -- argh." Something inside the magnetograph made an odd pinging noise. It was not a good sound. "Damn," she muttered.

"That sounds like something's broken," he said. "Do you think if --"

"I know what it sounds like," she snapped. "Why are you even here?"

"Well," said Asriel, "I thought you might be interested in --"

"Might I remind you, Asriel, that I am a married woman?" Marisa said.

He burst out laughing, which was quite the most insulting thing he could have done at that moment, but he put down the magnetograph and took a step sideways, so that he was not right behind her, and -- well, he was still too close, but at least she could see him. "Oh! You thought -- you thought I -- oh, well, of course, I suppose you might," he said, still laughing.

She struggled to extricate her hand from the complex innards of the magnetograph, still clutching the wrench, and mightily resisted the urge to hit him with it. "Oh, well, of course what?" she asked. If he was going to laugh at her, he could have the decency to explain.

"You're not that charming, Marisa," he said. "I mean, I know you're --"

"What do you mean, I'm not that charming?" she said.

"What I said," Asriel told her, still looking entirely too amused. "Besides, I prefer to surround myself with curious people. Inventive people. People who aren't shackled to the staid confines of Magisterial thinking. I am shocked we get along so well as it is, Marisa, because you're -- well, you're very devoted to your cause." He said this as though regretted the insult.

Marisa could hardly speak for rage. "What? I'm not -- that isn't --"

"But you are, as you say, a married woman." He smiled, extremely patronizingly. "At any rate, I came to find you because I've been looking for a research partner. You see, I've just found a rather interesting discrepancy in daemonic --"

"Well," said Marisa, "since I'm such a dullard, I suggest that you find a different research partner."

"One who's not married?" he asked, smirking. "Really, Marisa, if that's all that's keeping you from
hearing me out, it almost sounds like you don't trust yourself."

And she didn't really, did she? But she wasn't imagining things. "Of course that's not all," she snapped. "I love my husband! He's very..."

"Yes? He's very what?" Asriel asked, raising an eyebrow.

But before she could reply, the door to the lab opened, and the two of them sprung apart. Marisa felt as guilty as Asriel looked, for all that she had been the picture of outraged virtue only moments before. But the two gossiping girls who walked in took little notice of them; the short one watched her swan daemon alight onto a laboratory table and began to tell the tall redhead about the play her beau was taking her to that night. The two cast confused glances at Asriel, but Marisa told herself it was only because there were so rarely men in St. Sophia's laboratories. Surely they did not suspect. Surely they could not suspect. There wasn't even anything to suspect.

"Excuse me," said the girl with the swan daemon. "Is he really supposed to be here?"

"Edith, don't be nosy," hissed the redhead, but her sleek black tomcat watched curiously.

"He might break something. Those Jordan scholars never come over here except to make trouble," said Edith of the swan daemon.

Marisa recovered slightly. "He was just leaving. He was borrowing a -- a --"

"A wrench," said Asriel smoothly, taking Marisa's from her. "Thanks ever so much," he added, mimicking her earlier tone. "I'll be on my way, ladies." He gave them all a winning smile, and then he and his leopard were gone.

"Is he your husband?" Edith asked distastefully.

The redhead's cat hissed at the swan daemon, and the girl said "Leave it. Look, where's the argyrodite?" The two began to work on whatever their own project involved -- something to do with high-coherence light.

Marisa was briefly glad they'd moved on to doing their actual work, rather than gawping at her and Asriel. But then she looked down at her still-broken magnetograph, swore under her breath, and went to find another damn wrench.

* * *

Edward couldn't come to the theater tonight because he was very busy with things that were ever so much more important than his wife, and Asriel... well, after today, Marisa both wanted to see him again and knew a trip to the theater would be... unwise. So she ended up seeing the play with Natalia, who seemed inordinately pleased to have a night out, even if it was at the very last minute.

"Robert is in a mood," said Natalia, taking her coat off and settling into her seat. She paged through the program, cheerfully. "Oh, one of the actors is ill!" she said, examining a leaflet tucked into it. "Pity. What are we even seeing?"

"The Importance of Having Patience," said Marisa, more snappishly than she meant.

"Oh, is it a morality play?" Natalia asked.

"It's a comedy," Marisa said, rolling her eyes.
"What's it about, then?" she asked.

"You have a program, Natalia, haven't you? Why should I care?" Why was Natalia so dim?

"You're in a mood, too," said Natalia. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Natalia," said Marisa, glaring. "Leave me alone and watch the damned play."

At their feet, Ozymandias dug his nails into Naphtali's neck and bore his teeth, and the other woman's daemon whimpered and recoiled.

And so the four of them watched the play together in an uneasy silence. Before them, the actors and actresses laid the groundwork for the story of the night: an engagement prevented by an overbearing mother and then put at even greater risk by the revelation that the young man's name was not Ernest, nor was his daemon called Patience. Marisa nearly forgot her whole wretched day, which had largely been spent hunting for tools and deflecting the questions of the idiot girl with the swan daemon.

At the intermission, though, Natalia turned to her and said "Has that Asriel fellow turned you down, then?"

"What?" Marisa demanded, flustered. "No! I told you, I'm not having an affair with him," she hissed.

"Oh," said Natalia. She considered this briefly, and then, with a surprisingly shrewd look, said, "You turned him down."

Marisa stiffened, and Ozymandias hissed.

"I thought so," said Natalia, smugly. "I knew it must be one or the other. What on earth are you waiting for?"

"If you must know," said Marisa, "he -- he -- I turned him down, and he laughed at me. He was quite shockingly rude, as well."

Natalia's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Did he really?" She sounded entirely too amused, and Ozymandias showed even more of his gleaming teeth. "Not -- not that it's funny, of course not!" said Natalia. "He's clearly up to no good and I'm glad you had the sense to see that."

"Yes," said Marisa, sighing.

"I must admit, I wouldn't blame you in the slightest for getting bored with poor dear Edward, though. Husbands do have a startling tendency to lose their charm after a few years," said Natalia.

Marisa blinked. "Surely you don't mean Robert?"

"He wants children to a truly dreadful degree," said Natalia, "but I know he'd be awful at it and they're mostly snotty little terrors, aren't they? I keep thinking perhaps mine would be different, but..." She made an unhappy noise, and trailed off.

"I imagine it's all in handling them and managing not to kill them," said Marisa, who had always been able to get the younger girls at school to do as she said, and thought parenting was probably largely the same thing.

"So very like marriage itself, then," said Natalia, frowning. "Still, I don't know... do you think it would be different, if they were my children?"
"No," said Marisa, "I can't see how it would."

"I'll tell Robert we ought to wait until he gets that promotion," said Natalia. "I know he never will."

* * *

Marisa avoided the library, and anywhere else she might encounter Asriel for a few weeks, until she heard that he'd left on whatever mad errand he'd come to ask her help with earlier. She regretted being so irritable with him when she heard that he'd gone to Afric, but in the meantime, she tried very hard to be a good and dutiful wife, and a model student, and to meet the demands of society with aplomb and not impatience.

Then he came back, sunburned and delighted, and according to the rumor-mill he was working on some sort of bombshell of a paper and wouldn't tell anyone a thing about his findings. She kept her distance for a few months, but the rumors and her own doubts about her marriage and the fact that he was, well, Asriel, made it hard to stay away.

Marisa managed to hold out until she heard that Asriel was leaving next week for the North, whereupon she found herself wandering desperately through the shelves, searching him out. Ozymandias grew more and more agitated in her arms, and the two of them argued back and forth - "We shouldn't be seeing him again, should we?" "No, we shouldn't. But --" "--but he's leaving. And he's Asriel." "Yes."

When she found him, she composed herself before sitting down next to him without saying a thing, because she could not quite think what to say. She simply opened her book and began to read.

"Ah, the lady returns," said Asriel. "Couldn't stay away, could you?"

"I have some very vital research to do," she said coldly.

"Have you now?" said Asriel. He sighed. "Marisa, I've been thinking."

"An admirable pastime for a Scholar, I'm certain," said Marisa, not looking up from her reading.

"You know," said Asriel, "I suppose I came off as a bit insulting the last time we spoke, in the laboratory."

"You were rather unpleasant," she said, looking up something in the index.

"I suppose I must have surprised you, and in your shock, you assumed I was somehow interested in conducting an affair," said Asriel, "which does rather highlight the rudeness of sneaking up on people."

"Surprised me?" Marisa asked. "What an odd euphemism."

"Were you not surprised, then?" Asriel asked. His face was grave, but his daemon's tail twitched in amusement.

Marisa considered this. "I was, but I'm also not stupid," she said. "I know flirting when I hear it." She paused to consider her words for a moment. "And I know when I'm flirting back."

"Is this the part where you tell me you never want to see me again, for the sake of your marriage and your immortal soul?" Asriel asked.
"No, of course not. I would never be so melodramatic," said Marisa. Besides, he drew her to him, for some reason.

He laughed. "Well, then. You've made me feel much better about this."

Marisa frowned. "Just because I still want to speak to you doesn't mean I --"

"Oh, no, I meant about the little present I picked up for you in Benin." He pulled a box from his pocket, rather larger and flatter than a ring box, and pushed it towards her. It might hold a bracelet or a necklace. "It demonstrates some genuinely baffling principals of metaphysics. And when I saw it, I thought instantly of you."

Marisa looked down at the box with some worry. "Asriel," she said. "Asriel, I can't --" But Ozymandias was up on the table, opening the box anyway, and when Marisa saw the necklace inside, she could not help but smile.

It was a monkey, sculpted in loving and stylized detail in bronze. It had large ears and eyes, its tail looped around the thick chain, and its hands and feet -- "Oh!" said Marisa, surprised, for the monkey was climbing the chain as she watched. There were tiny joints in the sculpting, and she realized she'd seen something like this once before -- it reminded her of the metal bugs she had seen the soldiers using in Algerie.

"Asriel," she said, again. Was he courting her? She decided not to worry about it, because it was a lovely piece of jewelry -- and mystifying. It moved like clockwork, but when she picked it up, it released the chain and started climbing up her arm. She caught it and, keeping a firmer grip on it, she turned it over in her hands. She could not see a way to wind it up. "So you've been south as well as north, then. You got this in Afric."

"I ordered it," he said, "but yes."

"How does it work?" she asked, and he smiled knowingly -- because, she realized, it had been his intention all along to get her to ask that.

"Ah. That is a secret," he said. "One that would surely get any permits and stamps I have earned for being a good and pious theologian taken away from me. Would you like to meet the man who made it?" he asked.

"Is he in Oxford?" she asked.

"No," said Asriel. "He is a prince in Benin -- the king, truly, though his father holds that title. But he is a decent engineer himself, as you can see."

"But how does it work?" she asked. "Are you saying this extraordinary thing was constructed by some savage prince?"

Asriel tsked. "I find that the principles of natural philosophy and experimental theology are much easier to discover without a Magisterium man malingering in every laboratory, looking over my shoulder at every turn. Can you meet me in Cairo in three months' time?"

Marisa frowned. "Cairo is not in Benin, last I checked."

"No," said Asriel, "but they're having an experimental theology conference in Cairo three months from now, and it'd be a reasonable excuse for you to get out of the country."

"Well, it's awfully presumptuous of you," she said, "assuming I want to run off to some strange
country with you to become your -- your mistress -- just because you've spent money on some fancy jewelry."

"Oh, Marisa." He smiled. "Perhaps I flatter myself here, but -- well -- I know I appeal to you. Only I know even better that you're much more interested in how the damn thing works than in how pretty it is, or even how much you'd like to break your wedding vows."

"You're telling me it works because of a heresy," Marisa pointed out, watching the little monkey pendant. It only climbed so far up the chain, then dangled from its tail, switched, and climbed back the other way. "That's ridiculous."

"You must admit, though, it is a marvelously well-applied heresy," he said. "And this is only a hobbyist's toy. What a real engineer can do there -- well. It puts Oxford's pitiful building-sized difference engines quite to shame." He watched her watching the little clockwork bangle. "I should very much like to show you, Marisa."

If she turned him down, she would regret it always, and she would remember this moment: the beautiful clockwork monkey at play while her own daemon stood frozen in indecision, her notes and her real research forgotten for Asriel's oddly bittersweet smile and his fascinating madness. "I should very much like to see it," she admitted.

"It's settled, then!" he said, springing up out of his seat as if he himself was made of clockwork. "Three months' time. I'll send you a telegram with an address."

And then he was gone.

* * *

It had been surprisingly easy to slip away to Cairo for the conference, and when she came into the cool of the lobby from the oppressive heat of the city streets, she wondered if she might not just stay for the conference instead of doing something deeply, desperately foolish.

But her hand went to her pendantless necklace, and then, searchingly, to the pocket of her shirt, where she found the brass monkey clinging like a second daemon. It always wandered back to the chain eventually, she found, and in the intervening months she'd found herself desperately torn between wanting to open it up and take a look at the mechanism and not wanting to destroy such a beautiful thing.

It was much easier, apparently, to destroy her marriage.

Ozymandias climbed to her shoulder himself. "We ought to stay here," he told her.

"We ought to, yes," agreed Marisa. She reached past the clockwork monkey, into her pocket, and drew out the address Asriel had said she could find him.

Then she turned quickly, as if choices not made might yet catch up with her and devour her whole for her poor decisions, and paid the bellboy a generous sum to keep her luggage safely behind the desk while she went to meet Asriel.

When she found him -- the address was a bar, which surprised her not in the least -- he looked dreadful. He was pale and sweating and looked rather ill. "Fancy meeting you here," she said, sitting down next to him at the bar.

"You're here," he said, looking as astonished as if she'd appeared in a puff of smoke.
"I am," she said. "...Are you?" This was the first time she'd ever seen Asriel so... worried-looking. So vulnerable.

"I'm definitely here. I think." He looked around. "Yes. Here. Not anywhere else."

She frowned at him. He was being terribly disappointing today. "Is this something to do with me?"

"God, Marisa, you're so self-centered, d'you know that?" he said, disgustedly.

"We've got a lot in common, then, haven't we?" she said. She looked at his daemon, who lay on the floor with her paws over her face. She was uncharacteristically scruffy today. "What happened to you?" she asked.

"I met a girl," he said, with a ghost of the cocky grin he usually sported. "Oh god, why did I do that?"

"What do you mean?" she snapped, every cell in her body screaming with jealousy and outrage. How dare he? How dare he seduce her into doing this and then -- and then cheat on her? She reminded herself, shakily, that she hadn't so much as kissed him, hadn't touched his daemon -- although she wanted to comfort the poor snow leopard now, even if she looked just as dreadful and ill as Asriel at the moment.

"It wasn't like that," he protested. "She was a witch. Do you know what happens to men who turn down witches?"

Marisa glared at him.

"She was very beautiful," he admitted. "It was flattering."

"I imagine it was," said Marisa.

"And then I was my own insulting self," he explained, "and suddenly she had a knife at my throat. Much less flattering, that. Witches are surprisingly humorless."

She narrowed her eyes. "Is that how you are, then? Have you got somebody else set up to replace me when you get sick of me? If," she said hastily, "if anything were to happen between us, which I'm not saying it will." What was she doing here?

"No! God, no," said Asriel, swallowing. "I'm -- I'm frightened she'll come after me, is all. We got into an argument, and I was -- well, I was perfectly reasonable, but the lady was no lady at all," he said, darkly. "I'm glad to see you, though. I'm really -- you're --" He smiled. "The thing is, I know you just came for that thing." He pointed at the clockwork monkey. "'Why I gave it to you. You're beautiful when you're ruthless. And when you're curious. I knew you couldn't stay away from a challenge."

Marisa found that she was mollified, quite against her will. It was difficult to stay angry at somebody who was so flattering. She didn't think she was supposed to find accusations of ruthlessness flattering, but she did. "Well," she said, "how are we going to get to Benin, then?"

"I've a private zeppelin," said Asriel. "I used it to get down here. I think I was polite enough that she -- but I -- you never know with witches," he said.

"Well, then, come on," said Marisa, helping him stand. "I want to meet this African prince." She watched as Ozymandias coaxed the snow leopard to her feet. Her daemon was being surprisingly
tender with the leopard, and Marisa's misgivings about this little side-trip returned stronger than ever. "If only to see how this supposed heresy might be explained," she added quickly.

* * *

It took almost three days to get from Cairo to Ife, and after Asriel had recovered, he spent most of the flight looking out the window of the gondola nervously, jumping at every large bird he saw, and bothering his manservant, who occasionally said reassuring things, and occasionally joined his master in looking nervously out the window.

The manservant clearly disliked her, and Asriel was clearly an idiot, so Marisa used the time to catch up on reading theological journals. By the time they arrived in Ife, Asriel seemed almost back to -- well, not his old self, but a considerably more gentlemanly version of that self. He even offered her his arm when they disembarked from the zeppelin.

A group of tall men in uniform with predatory daemons led them through a busy marketplace toward the palace. From the air, she had seen a neatly-laid-out city of square thatched-roof houses with courtyards, and huge factory-like buildings on the outskirts, with smokestacks billowing, and she had assumed that the city would be nothing more than an overgrown village. But the street was broad and even, and while some of the women in the market stalls sold fruits and bright clothes and cloth, plenty of others sold complex clockworks, most much more intricate than the necklace Asriel had given her, and a number of them seemed rather more practical. There were strange, tiny marconis with no discernible power source, and beautiful clocks in the shape of roosters, and even a disembodied brass arm which would take dictation as well as any scrivener. Marisa yearned to get a closer look at them, but Asriel laughed and said "Time for that later. We wouldn't want to keep the Prince waiting, would we?"

Prince Ogunwe was a powerfully-built young man, perhaps a little younger than Asriel, with a cheetah daemon. "Asriel, you madman!" Ogunwe exclaimed. "Just what have you been up to?"

"Oh, the usual. Causing trouble, travelling --"

"Drinking too much," supplied Marisa.

"And that," said Asriel, grinning as if he hadn't been horrible company for days. "Just got back from Latvia. I won't be back there for a while, I don't think."

"Too cold?" Ogunwe asked.

"Too hot, in a manner of speaking," said Asriel. "And this is Marisa. Marisa, Ogunwe."

"Ah. The lady with the monkey," said Ogunwe, looking her over as if he was deciding whether he approved.

"Yes," said Marisa, trying not to sound too impressed by the fascinating, irritating, beautiful thing Ogunwe had evidently made specifically for Asriel to give to her. "You have... quite a city, it looks like. The factories, are they --"

"Bronzeworks," said Ogunwe. "We take great pride in our manufacturing here in Ife. The finest craftsmen, inventors, and mechanical awo come here to create the finest clockworks in Benin."

"...Mechanical awo?" Marisa whispered to Asriel.

"Experimental theologians," said Asriel.
Marisa frowned. "Are you... are you Christians here?"

"Some are," said Ogunwe. "More than you would think, but not all of them are only Christian. And we do not allow the Magisterium's officers to ply their trade here, because in the past it has interfered with the spirits we wish to cultivate."

Marisa's head spun, as she wondered how they could have theology without the Church. She knew that some parts of Afric were dark and untouched by the truth, and others were mired in the Muhammedian heresies, but this was utterly mad.

Ozymandias, sitting on her shoulder, picked the bronze monkey off her necklace and examined it sourly, but she took it from him before he could twist the little clockwork's head off. "Stop that, and pay attention," she whispered at him.

She asked many questions, and more often than not Asriel and Ogunwe laughed and laughed at her. Wasn't that the way of things, though? Whenever she tried to understand things others did not, she was met with laughter, but soon enough she realized that Ogunwe, though he certainly understood his own heretical theology well enough to make clockworks, was not an expert. To truly understand these heresies, she would have to stay here and ask the experts, these craftsmen and inventors and... and awo he had spoken so highly of.

By the end of the day, she had seen a great deal, and she felt it had been an age since she'd last been at the house in Oxford with Edward settled into a chair reading the paper, or in London dining with her old school friends.

After supper at the palace, Asriel offered to walk her back to her room. Her room, not their room, he made a point of saying.

"Oh, come in," she said, rolling her eyes at this. She took his hand, and he seemed surprisingly startled. "You're very jumpy, you know," she told him.

Asriel simply blinked at her, but his daemon, who had been watching her with thoughtful amber eyes, spoke up. "We didn't realize how much we liked you until we met Ruta Skadi."

Marisa had never heard his daemon speak before. They had not been formally introduced. "The witch," she said flatly, and Ozymandias showed his teeth.

"Marisa, I --" Asriel started, in an apologetic tone.

Marisa didn't want him to apologize. "Oh, do shut up," she said, and then she grabbed him by his collar and kissed him hard.

His hands were in her hair and his lips were on hers, and she pulled him into the room and shoved him against the wall.

"Marisa," he whispered in her ear, and then he pushed her away, and said, slightly less gaspingly, "Marisa, not that I'm complaining, but are you certain --"

She raised an eyebrow. "Very certain." And she knew Ozymandias was running his hands through the leopard's thick fur, both because it felt right and because she could hear the daemon purring.

* * *

While the night had been blissful, the next morning was... less so. Marisa had awoken from sweet dreams to recall, sourly, that she had a husband and studies and a whole life, one that Asriel did not
She resolved to be businesslike about the entire thing, but she could not help but pet sleeping Stelmaria, for she was just as lovely as Asriel, and it was likely this that made him stir and open his eyes. "Mr'isa?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"I'm going to the marketplace," said Marisa, with a certain brisk cheerfulness.

"Oh. Wait for me?" But she was already getting dressed, and he must not have been that interested, because he drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

The marketplace was as colorful as it had been last time, and Marisa went looking for something inexpensive. She was glad she had thought to bring most of her money in gold guineas, as much of a hassle as that had been, because when she offered notes for the little figure she tried to buy, the woman at the stall and her little bird daemon simply laughed at her.

Marisa had assumed it was a children's toy, but as Ozymandias spoke with her daemon, she came to understand that it was some sort of heathen idol, and that it operated because the spirit it represented willed it to. She smiled, trying not to let the distaste show either on her face or on Ozymandias', and inquired as to who was making these statues.

By talking to the women and, later, to some of the craftsmen, Marisa found, over the course of the day, that the people here thought their clockworks moved because they made use of various kinds of spirits. There was no external source -- no anbaric current and no winding mechanism. Marisa knew absolutely that that was not how spirits worked. Certainly, the spiritual world was very real - the existence of daemons proved this, and the behavior of Rusakov particles around settled, adult daemons suggested the material world was not entirely immune to the effects of metaphysical reality. But it wasn't as though one could summon up a spirit and use it as if it was some sort of chemical battery. That was the sort of thing people could only do in fairy tales. Everyone Marisa talked to told her that the spirits had to be treated gently -- coddled, she could not help thinking -- but that, too, seemed ridiculous.

She still couldn't make sense of it, as she walked back to the palace. After she'd settled herself in the hot, shady courtyard to think, but when Asriel ran to greet her in the courtyard, she was so startled Ozymandias shrieked and fell from his perch upon her shoulder.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Out," she said, frowning at him. "I did come for the heresy," she reminded him.

"Ah. Yes," said Asriel, recovering his rakish grin. "Of course. And how is the heresy, then?"

"It grows very well in these parts," said Marisa. "They say they use spirits to power their machines. But that can't be true."

Asriel laughed. "You wait until you see one of their ceremonies."

"Why?" Marisa asked, frowning.

"Oh, they get very involved. They wear costumes and masks and --"

"So it's a sort of a savage Christmas pantomime, then," Marisa said.

He and Stelmaria exchanged an astonished look, and then the leopard turned to her and said "You have no idea, do you?"
"Well, I intend to get to the bottom of it," she snapped, color rising in her cheeks. Marisa hadn't yet encountered a problem she couldn't solve in the realm of experimental theology, and she intended to solve this one.

Although, come to think of it, the only problem she hadn't managed to solve outside the realm of experimental theology was Asriel. She looked him up and down, and decided that she didn't want to solve him -- not right now, at any rate. "How long do you think that'll take?" he asked her, amused.

"Oh, some time, I expect," said Marisa. "And I've been working on it all day. I might as well relax," she said.

And so when Asriel offered her his to escort her back to the bedroom -- her bedroom? Theirs, definitely -- she took it. And when he closed the door and kissed her, she pulled him closer. And when Stelmaria pinned Ozymandias to the floor with her paw and nipped him delicately, Marisa put the rest of the world out of her mind and thought of nothing but Asriel's hands and his mouth and his cock and his name on her lips.

* * *

A week or so after her initial inquiries into the problem of Benin's bronze clockworks, Marisa had made little progress. She'd spoken to some of the 'mechanical awo' Ogunwe had mentioned. For some reason, she had expected them to dress like experimental theologists, but be unfamiliar with the basic principles of her field. Instead, she found the opposite was true -- they dressed like other noble residents of Ife, in soft cloth woven in complicated patterns, but they understood quite well how the world worked. They knew all about gravitation and anbaromagnetism and the two sorts of matter, and at one point she got into a very heated debate with an otherwise mild-mannered priestess about the form of light and its propagation through space.

She had made hardly any progress, and it was enough to drive her quite mad, and she knew she could not leave this place until she'd made sense of it -- or at least more sense of it.

And then there was the matter of Asriel, and the related matter of Edward.

So Marisa was writing a letter to the latter, which the former was reading over her shoulder.

"My dearest Edward," Asriel said in a somewhat insulting falsetto. "It pains me greatly that I should be parted from you for so long, but unfortunately I can see no way around my dilemma. I have been afflicted with a local illness, a piffling thing akin to chicken pox, which Customs will not allow me to bring back into Brytain....' Your dearest Edward?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's how I always write to him when he's away," said Marisa.

Asriel made a face, and Stelmaria gave a most uncatlike cough, which sounded like a sort of stifled snigger. Ozymandias tugged the note away from her before Asriel could read any more of it, and folded it. They had made arrangements with Prince Ogunwe; he knew a man who was travelling to Cairo, who could post the letter from there, but she could tell Asriel had been offended that she had taken the time to make up a convincing lie.

"Do you really think he'll believe that, though?" he asked.

"He'd better for everyone's sake," she said. She pictured Edward's reaction to learning he had been cuckolded. Perhaps she would be lucky and he'd only be distraught at the damage it could do to his political career, but the way Edward looked at her was... not unlike the way Asriel sometimes
looked at her now.

She did not like the comparison. She could not stand to think of Asriel becoming more like Edward, even if it was because they both loved her -- and perhaps because they both loved her. She could not shake the feeling that they loved something they saw in her that was not her. Did they see in her Mary's nobility of purpose? Eve's sinful nature? Something else? She could not tell.

* * *

Marisa had been tempted to give up on the theological mysteries of Benin -- or rather, she had almost resisted the temptation to stay and work on solving them -- but the masquerade festival changed all that. At first she had rolled her eyes at the spectacle of it -- the Church had once had rituals like this too, before the Papacy had been abolished, back in the bad old days -- but Asriel had insisted she ought to see it, and so Marisa listened to the drums, and watched as the procession of dancers wearing bright, outlandish costumes over their heads came down the street. She was ready to find this rather tiresome, because it was a pity she couldn't speak to Ayodele, one of the smiths she'd met at the marketplace instead of watching what seemed rather like a sort of Yoruba Hallowtide; all that was missing were the carved gourds and the nasty little children.

The comparison was even more apropos when she discovered that these people actually believed themselves to be possessed by the spirits of the dead. Clearly, Asriel was having a bit of fun with her -- she had marconis and dictation machines and beautifully-made clocks to unravel, and she'd seen calculation engines so small two men could carry them and so efficient they could run factories with minimal supervision, and this, of all things, was what he thought she had to see? She looked at him and saw that he was grinning in anticipation, and gritted her teeth.

Then she noticed the dancers' daemons. They were flickering. One man in a ram mask had a daemon that went parrot-ewe-parrot-ewe-parrot-ewe, faster than she'd seen any daemon over the age of seven change. And she saw another daemon shifting between a gazelle and a snake, over and over again. Could it be some trick of the light? They couldn't actually be -- they couldn't be really changing.

Though it was very hot, Marisa felt chilled to the bone.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Asriel said in her ear. "If you can explain that one, they'll canonize you. That or execute you for heresy, I don't know. There's a fine line, I suppose."

"But how can they possibly --" Marisa demanded.

He shrugged expansively. "Spirits of the dead, I expect." They watched as a man in a red and blue costume paraded down the street. The cloth of his costume covered his head, and a purple cape billowed out behind him as he moved, and the lizard daemon resting on his shoulder flickered into a hornbill in time with the drums.

"We did always wonder how they could see in those things, especially since their daemons seem in no state to help them navigate," Stelmaria said, cheerfully overlooking the impossibility of the facts.

"Oh, shut up," snapped Ozymandias, and Marisa chewed on her lip and quietly considered exactly how much of her reality had been upended.

And after she'd recovered from the shock of the masquerade Marisa was lost again -- lost to experimental theology, at any rate. Asriel had lost interest in this work by now, because he had
found some anbaric phenomenon at the North Pole that merited explanation. That was all well and fine, but even as jealousy clawed at her heart -- for she thought he must be abandoning her to pursue the witch again -- Marisa knew she could not abandon daemons changing, and clockworks that she swore could almost think on their own. She had seem some of the more practical applications of the clockworks now, especially the military applications, and not only was it a matter of simple curiosity that drove her, but worry that the enemies of the Magisterium might strike with this bizarre and unknown technology at any time. Fortunately the Empire of Benin had yet to set its sights upon the Magisterium's territories, but this was not true of Danxome, who bought weaponry like the clockwork bugs she'd seen when she was young -- and when she'd asked Prince Ogunwe about the zombis, he'd confirmed everything the soldiers had told her then.

In her next letter to Edward, she started telling him some of the truth -- that she was in Ife, and that during her recovery from illness, she had become intrigued by the clockworks of Benin, and thus she was taking the opportunity to conduct some independent inquiry into same, and by the way, could Edward order this equipment for her and send it along care of the Prince of Ife?

She ended up spending a year there, travelling from city to city, watching clockworks be molded by the blacksmiths, built by tradeswomen, and have life breathed into them by theologians. She disassembled some of these herself, though she found that, whether or not the battery powering them was, as they told her, a spirit, it wasn't the sort of thing she wanted loose in a room with her. She took photograms on Rusakov-sensitive film of egungun masqueraders and their daemons while they were performing and while they were posing for her, and found that, contrary to her expectations, the dancers were absolutely filthy with Dust when they performed -- moreso than any experimental subjects she'd seen.

She could not explain a damn thing about how this worked. And what was almost worse was that sometimes the theologians here had come to entirely different conclusions about the spiritual plane than the ones everybody back home understood -- and their results bore that out.

If gravitation and the speed of light and anbaromagnetism was the same all over the world, why was the spiritual realm different? Marisa could not puzzle it out. Meanwhile, Asriel seemed insulted that she had not been content to follow him back north at a moment's notice every time he saw her. He had taken to sending letters mocking her for worrying so much on this. Once he'd sent her a morbidly cheerful little picture-book called An Alphabet of Heretics, in which he had thoughtfully bookmarked all the natural philosophers. There were rather a lot of them. It had made her laugh, though, to see the note he'd written under "N is for Newton," and the woodcut of the man sitting under an apple tree, serpent daemon coiled around his throat. He was only a Cambridge man, Asriel had scribbled, so it cannot have been any great loss.

* * *

Marisa returned to Oxford with pages and pages of written observations, photograms, data, sound recordings on wax, scientific equipment, complicated clockworks in various states of completion and disassembly, and misgivings galore. Edward had kept planning to visit her in Benin, but there had been some sort of scandal at home, and that had made it very easy for her to stay in Afric and pretend she wasn't doing something dreadfully wrong. Asriel came and went as he pleased, and Marisa enjoyed his company more than she ought to, even if he was a twit sometimes.

She also returned pregnant. One of the Iyanifa priestesses she had got to know -- an otherwise matter-of-fact, sensible woman whose family had been working with spirits for generations -- had somehow divined this using a chain of eight seed-pods. She had added, quite unnecessarily, that the child would be important, that she would change the world for the better and have a place in all the worlds that ever were. Marisa had disregarded this at the time, because it was probably the
most ridiculous thing she had ever heard, but once she was back in Bryptain, she began to have misgivings.

Her own doctor -- a safely white-coated man in his sixties -- confirmed as much after examining her, and Marisa managed to convince him not to tell Edward. She made it sound as though she knew Edward would find it a wonderful surprise, and he accepted this without question.

Then she tried to work out what she was going to do. She could be certain to seduce him tonight, keep the doctor away from her busy politician husband, fudge the due date a few months, and try to brazenly lie her way through it, but that was the problem with Edward: he usually saw through her lies.

There were... people, she knew, doctors -- sort of -- and not the back-alley bloodsuckers working-class women saw when they had kept company too freely with men, but higher-class sort of bloodsuckers, who catered to women with money, who had respectable reputations to maintain. Natalia had seen one of them, even, and had offered his name when Marisa told her of her dilemma.

But Marisa felt uneasy about that solution, even more so than she did about simply lying. Edward was certain to realize, and if she stooped to illegal surgeries, well, it was just one more little shame, one more little proof that she had fallen from grace, almost worse than the child itself would be. And, she found, it also bothered her to rid the world of something that was... well, part of her, in a sense, something that she herself was a part of.

At first she decided to try lying. Perhaps Edward's pride would keep him from pointing out the simple mathematics of the thing, and perhaps his love for his career would cause him to at least feign some affection for another man's child. So Marisa tried to settle back into her life in Oxford.

She found, to her horror, that it was dreadful. Edward was barely around, a fact which she'd taken some comfort from in Afric, but here, now, it only meant she came home to a dark, lonely house while somewhere her husband was furiously working on a new proposal to regulate marconi dramas, and saying wise, comforting things to a populace shocked by plays where men and women touched each other's daemons. Or rather, a man petted a housecat while a woman writhed onstage, her daemon concealed beneath the bed she lay on, and the audience told all their friends how terrible it was, and all their friends bought tickets. A populace, in short, which she had outgrown, and a husband who seemed almost more of an automaton than the idolatrous clockwork figurines she had brought from Benin.

So she did what in retrospect was the stupid thing -- the thing Marisa Coulter would never have expected herself to do. She did the sort of thing a lovesick girl of eighteen might. She wrote to her lover and asked him for help.

At first, when she saw Asriel, she was furious with him for having brought her to this. "Do you know what's happened, Asriel?" she demanded, after the butler had shown him into her sitting room. Edward was in London, as usual, and she didn't think he'd be back for a few days.

"What on earth have they been teaching you St. Sophia's girls, Marisa?" he asked, irritably. "Of course I know what's happened. You're suffering the natural consequences of your indiscretions."

"My indiscretions?" demanded Marisa. She took a few steps toward Asriel, although she resisted the urge to hit him. "Mine? What about you? I seem to remember you being rather pushy about --"

"Pushy?" demanded Asriel.
"And clinging," said Marisa. "I was just trying to get work done and -- and," she said, "you left me for that witch."

"I certainly did not!" said Asriel. "I left you for the Aurora, because you were ignoring me, and then I came back and visited, and you would barely spare a look away from your clockworks to give me the time of day, which I, for one, found highly ironic, not least of which because I am the one who showed them to you first! And now you summon me like a servant or a dog, to see me for the first time in a month, and it's because you want to accuse me of -- of what, exactly?" he demanded.

"I'm pregnant. It's clearly yours, as I haven't been with Edward for over a year," said Marisa. "What am I supposed to do, Asriel? I can't get rid of it," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Edward would know," she said. "He's got this sense about truth." She took up Ozymandias in her arms to soothe him, for he had been baring his teeth at Stelmaria.

"So it's not that you have a heart after all? Well," he said. "I can't say I'm surprised."

She glared at him. To be truthful, she could not imagine raising a child with Edward. It seemed... less terrible, to raise one with Asriel, because the things Asriel liked about her were not the things she made use of as a politician's wife. He was without a doubt a heretic of the worst sort, and that alone ought to make him a miserable husband and a worse father, even without his pettiness and cruelty and the way he favored saying clever things over doing wise ones, but she could not help but think what might have happened had she somehow married Asriel instead. She could have been an explorer's wife -- no, she could have been an explorer alongside him, as she had been so briefly in Afric. "Asriel," she said, "I ran away with you once, and here I am back again, and all I can think of is running away with you again, as damned insulting as you are," she said.

His expression softened. "Well. If worst comes to worst, you come to me," he said. He put out a hand to stroke her cheek. "As exasperating as you are, I am very, very fond of --"

There was a noise from anteroom, and the two of them, expecting, perhaps, the butler, took a few steps back. Asriel, unfamiliar with the layout of the room, found himself accidentally falling into a large armchair, and Stelmaria snickered a bit, but she stopped as soon as the door opened.

"Edward," said Marisa, trying to sound happy that he was home early instead of terrified and irritated. "You're home very early."

"Finally got my resolution through Commons this morning," said Edward, rubbing his eyes tiredly. His daemon Theodora looked nearly wilted. Her little chameleon eyes swiveled lazily to take in Marisa and Asriel, though, and Marisa felt a little shock of fear. Were they found out? But Edward simply smiled at the two of them. "Lord Asriel! How lie the frozen wastes?"

"They, er. They lie well," said Asriel, frowning at Edward. "I mean, they're still terribly frozen, of course. I was -- Marisa and I were just --" Marisa was glad when he shut up, if only because Ozymandias had swung down from her arms to pinch Stelmaria.

"Lord Asriel seems to think some of my research in Benin has applications to his own studies of the Aurora Borealis," said Marisa smoothly. Edward couldn't tell an egungun from a panzerbjorn, and she doubted he'd inquire further.

"Well," said Edward, putting an arm around Marisa rather suddenly (and subtly feeling her up,
which made Stelmaria hiss) "I was thinking Marisa and I might go out for a victory supper. Would you care to join us?"

No! Marisa thought. "Oh," said Asriel. "Yes! That sounds delightful. Congratulations. What, er, was the resolution about?" Marisa knew whatever it was would make Asriel hate Edward even more -- Asriel hated the work of the Ministry of Public Morality as much as he hated the Magisterium -- but Edward was an idiot, and did not notice the leopard baring more and more of her sharp teeth even as Asriel smiled and nodded.

* * *

Somehow, Marisa had managed to keep her cool all through her pregnancy. She was quite the most glamorous pregnant mother the papers had ever conjured up, and she submitted to interviews and photograms and poking and prodding. At night, when she went to sleep exhausted from dealing with the fact of her pregnancy, the brouhaha surrounding it, the stress of lying to an entire press corps, and her occasional attempts to finish her book, she often pictured the most irritating person of the day engulfed in flames, and the thought made her smile.

Sometimes the most irritating person of the day was Edward. Very occasionally, it was Asriel, who, though she had spoken to him only rarely, she occasionally caught glimpses of out of the corner of her eye when she and Edward went to supper, or to the theater. She was, on the whole, proud of herself for not acknowledging him, for keeping calm, and for lying immensely well.

But eventually the child was born -- one day when Edward was, yet again, away on business -- and Marisa's resolve snapped. Her midwife looked at her oddly, and told her that the baby was an unusually pretty child. Marisa was not expecting much, considering how painful and awful it had been pushing the damned thing out, and how very loud it was screaming. But when she presented Marisa with her new, still screaming daughter, she had Asriel's golden hair, and she was quite beautiful, even red-faced and angry -- perhaps she had Asriel's temper, too. Marisa could not keep from panicking for long, especially when the girl's daemon coalesced and -- she knew she was being ridiculous, but really -- the daemon was a little leopard cub.

The next few hours were a blur of convincing the midwife she was all right, and that she wanted to be alone with her little daughter, and sending a messenger to Asriel, and packing furiously though she felt very sore and in no mood to run, and finally, finally, an anbaric carriage pulled up in front of the house and she threw her luggage in before climbing into the carriage herself, the baby in her arms.

"Let me see," said a voice from within the carriage, and Marisa nearly dropped the girl, for she had not been expecting Asriel to show up himself.

"Oh," she said. "It's only you."

"Only me?" he asked, insulted. He took the child from her arms without asking, and absently ordered the driver onward.

They rode for hours into the countryside, and along the way Asriel outlined his plans. A Gyptian girl on his estate, who had recently had a child of her own, would make an excellent nurse for the child, and once this unpleasantness had all blown over -- Asriel made it sound like all they need do was find shelter and warmth and hunker down, as if this was but a snowstorm -- he and Marisa could start a brand new life together. And in the meantime, they would be together.

Though his ideas sounded outlandish, Marisa told herself that Asriel was an outlandish sort of person, and if anybody could make things work on willpower alone, it was him. Exhausted and,
for the first time in months, truly happy, she lay her head on his shoulder and drifted off into blissful sleep, while Asriel considered names for their daughter. "Cassiopeia? No, too vain... Andromeda, perhaps? Vulpecula's a bit silly, we can't call her that. …Lyra, perhaps?"

***

Their first evening on Asriel's estate was delightful. They settled the baby in with the Gyptian woman, Pamina Costa, and Marisa slept alongside Asriel, their daemons curled up between them, free from worry for the first time in months.

The next day, Asriel offered to take her out riding. Marisa nearly laughed at him -- he was suddenly being so gracious and gentlemanly now that they had a daughter -- but she caught herself, and merely smiled and told him she was in no shape to ride yet. So she spent most of the day working on her book, and didn't get out of the house until that afternoon, when she decided to go for a walk and look in on Lyra. Of all the sudden changes in Marisa's life, Lyra was the one she was least certain about, but she was here with Asriel, and that was what mattered.

But Marisa arrived at the Costa cottage to find Mrs. Costa gone and the nursery a wreck, and she knew something had gone very wrong.

"Lyra," whispered Ozymandias, and he was in her arms, and they were running to the house to find the nurse and the baby.

She saw Edward on the road, and he was carrying a gun, and he was the angriest she'd ever seen him -- in fact, she didn't know that she'd ever seen him really, truly angry. But from what she could see of his face, she didn't dare confront him, even though he was only Edward, and in all her experience utterly harmless.

How had they been found out? Marisa considered who had known, and who might have reason to suspect, and except for some of her and Edward's servants -- who Marisa could not credit with enough imagination to betray her -- and Asriel's servants -- who would not betray him -- she could think of only one person.

Natalia.

She stopped in her tracks, and she hardly noticed Ozymandias gripping her shoulder tightly in absolute fury, because she herself was putting all her effort into not screaming in rage. Natalia, her boring, stupid, dimwitted, fat little school friend if you could call her a friend with a worthless dog daemon and a dull husband! Natalia had ruined everything!

She hardly noticed as Edward stomped into Asriel's house with a gun, and stood there raging until she saw Asriel stealing after him, still in his hunting clothes.

"Asriel!" she shouted, running after him. "Asriel, be careful. He has a gun."

"Marisa! Stay out here. I'll deal with this myself," he told her. And he kissed her once, hard, then left her to go after her husband.

There was a lot of shouting, and Marisa couldn't resist -- she went inside, where Edward and Asriel were standing. "How dare you -- how dare you corrupt my wife like this?" demanded Edward, and then he caught sight of her. "There you are, you -- you -- Marisa, why did you do it?" he asked her, and he was near tears, she realized, but he was also waving a gun at her, and she backed up, frightened for her life. "I thought you loved me!" He was pathetic, and that made him even more terrifying, and Marisa found herself at a strange loss for words.
"Coulter!" snarled Asriel, punching him soundly in the jaw. He fell to the floor, and the gun flew out of his hand. "Don't you point that at her! You say I corrupted her? I say you and your damned Magisterium and your damned Ministry have corrupted all of us!"

In any other situation, Marisa would have asked Asriel if this was really the time for one of his political rants, but she watched in horror as Theodora nudged the gun towards Edward, and his shaking hand raised it to point at Asriel, and he fired! Marisa thought she would die then and there, but by some miracle, or simply out of fear and ineptness, Edward had missed Asriel, and there was a small bullet-hole in the plaster of the ceiling.

Asriel grabbed the gun from his shaking hand before he had time to re-aim, and turned the gun on Edward. He pulled the trigger, and a second shot rang through the air, and Edward had fallen, a bullet in his brain and his blood seeping out beneath him, and Theodora vanished.

"Well, that's over and done with," said Asriel, throwing the gun down matter-of-factly onto the corpse's chest. The sound of a child crying was coming from a closet near the stairs, and Asriel smiled and said, "Come out, Mrs. Costa, and bring the baby. Marisa, I do believe I could use some Tokay, couldn't you?"

Marisa stared at her husband's dead body, then took a deep breath. "Asriel, we're not going to be able to get away from this."

"Nonsense," he said, taking the baby from Mrs. Costa, whose hawk daemon still trembled on her shoulder. Lyra was still wailing, and her daemon had taken the form of a baby bird, the better to proclaim his terror to the world, and when Asriel spoke softly to the little girl and played with her and got her to stop crying, Marisa thought for a moment it might be all right, but then she saw Edward dead on the floor and knew it never could be.

She was so distraught when the police finally came, looking for Edward, that she quite forgot to lie to them.

* * *

The trial was the most horrible thing Marisa had ever gone through -- worse even than her lonely, terrifying childbirth. Her family had disowned her, she could not look at Asriel, and as for the child, well, the little girl reminded her only of all she had lost. She'd sent the baby to a priory. Her friends, if she could call them that, were anxious to hear every salacious detail of what had happened, but none wanted to be seen in public with her, and communication had been limited to anxious, hastily-written letters. Marisa didn't blame them. She didn't want to be seen in public with her either.

It was, needless to say, a shock when Natalia showed up on her doorstep in Oxford, Naphtali hanging his head as though he'd been scolded. Marisa narrowed her eyes. "I was planning on having you shot," she told Natalia.

"So was your husband, if I didn't tell him where I thought you might be," said Natalia. "I'm sorry. I'm not a very brave person."

"Then why are you here?" she asked. "There are going to be photograms of you all over the tabloids, you know. They'll say you were in on the whole thing. They'll say you're having Asriel's child too. At this rate, they'll say practically anything as long as they can put the words 'Belacqua' or 'Coulter' in the headline. I suppose you're here to say you told me so."

"I wanted to apologize, that's all," said Natalia. "And I didn't tell you so," she added sulkily,
"because you never asked."

"You were thinking it," said Marisa.

Natalia frowned to herself. "I was, I suppose." She took a deep breath. "But, look, you're going to need to get back on your feet again eventually, and, well... I doubt very much if the law or the Coulters will let you keep the house, considering. And Robert and I are going to have to move --"

"Why? Has scandal tainted the neighborhood too much for him?" Marisa asked.

"No," said Natalia, unhappily. "He's got that promotion I said he couldn't get. We've got to move, but our house will need somebody to take care of it. It's not as grand as yours and Edward's was, but you'd be in Oxford."

"And you'd do this out of the goodness of your heart?" Marisa asked.

"Don't be daft," said Natalia. "I'd do it because as long as you're hanging around, you might give Robert second thoughts about raising children under the malign influence of Marisa Coulter, Noted Adulteress. I know you must have plans, even now, and unless they're treasonous -- one must draw the line somewhere -- I'd very much like to know what they are."

Marisa snorted. "I'm writing a book. I shall try, for your sake, to keep it from being too treasonous. But as for heresy, I make no guarantees."

End Notes

Real things this fic incorporates:

The Dahomey Amazons really existed. Dahomey or Danxome was a kingdom encompassing the present-day country of Benin.

The Benin Empire, meanwhile, existed in present-day Nigeria. Given Ogunwe's name -- a reference to the orisha Ogun -- and Marisa's authorship of a book called The Bronze Clocks of Benin, I thought it would be interesting to write about her there.

Asriel's Word of God research at the party is a reference to cosmic microwave background radiation, which is just really damn cool.

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