Icarus
by trinity_destler

Summary

When Loki let go of the spear, he fell to earth in more ways than one. Meanwhile, months after Thor vanished into the sky, Jane Foster is still trying to get off the ground.

(In which Jane's curiosity is one of the more powerful forces in the known universe, Loki has more issues than a magazine rack, Darcy doesn't have a filter, and Erik Selvig holds out vain hope that his life will stop being quite so interesting. A slow burn romance springs up from a bed of science and Asgardian family angst.)

Notes

This story is firmly movieverse, with characterisation based entirely on the first Thor film, including the Loki stuff from the deleted scenes (they're on youtube if you haven't seen them). Completely ignores both The Avengers and the teaser for it in the credits, but it is otherwise a canon-compliant direct continuation.
Burn (Prologue)

"...how everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster;

the ploughman may have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

but for him it was not an important failure;

and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen something amazing,

a boy falling out of the sky,

had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on."

W.H. Auden

He had imagined it would be his last act of will in the waking Realms to slide sideways through the void which was real and the void between, then back again somewhere else entirely. It did not matter where he emerged, which stars and darkness consumed him. He travelled at all only so that he would not fall through the ruins of the Bifrost to Jotunheim. Not die there. He had nothing left to want, but he yet did not want, and what he did not want was to suffer the knowledge that Odin's rescue, the whole course of his own life, had made no difference in the manner of his death.

And so he fell.

Time spun outward as he moved through the influence of many worlds, their gravitation pulling his last instant into ages. Mortal years passed. His grief and rage cooled to a brittle agony. The hopelessness of his love for father, brother, mother, home, grew sharp-edged with certainty. At least that love would not be twisted further, would no longer fuel him forward in recklessness, for he saw now that it could not be mended any more than it could be destroyed. It was almost comforting to know that there had never been anything for him, that he was not passed over as he had so long thought, the injustice of which had so long been working to bring his once-temperate blood to the most violent of boils.

His pain had been in how far his reach exceeded his grasp. Being nothing, he'd deserved nothing. They had done only harm in giving him any more.

He regretted it. Regretted the very moment his father had held him in warm hands and tried to change what he was.

He longed for death and there an end.

He was safe from Valhalla, from meeting his family again over feasting and wine at some distant future date beneath those gleaming halls, his last gasps too dishonoured by cowardice to allow him entry to the warrior's paradise. He would never see them again. And though he was yet very young among his people- both his peoples- he felt impossibly ancient under the heavy memory of his last moments with his mother. Her fierce, lovely face white with horror as she watched him cast out his brother with their father's spear.

The spear of kingship which was rightfully his, which- equally rightfully- his unclean hands should never have been permitted to touch. The brother who would have should have destroyed him before he could e'er set foot in Asgard, if he had but known the truth. The brother whose love cut more deeply than his hate.
He regretted both.

Was it the unknowing attempt to be one of them, not realising his nature must be fought, that had lead him to this? Without knowing his strange interests and diplomatic disposition portended more than just an unfashionable, atypical, disappointment of a prince. Was it their suppression of the monster- teaching it to think itself a man, letting it believe itself worthy of that fraternity which naturally would not come- which had turned his mind? Or was it only the infinitely futile desire to be the equal of shining Thor?

He knew it was not precisely the original attempt to be what he was not born to be which had consumed him, which had torn worlds, that had only set him high on a precipice, his balance uncertain and the path treacherous. It was the more earnest, desperate, second effort to be what he truly was not which had caused him to fall. Cracks in his patch-work identity had shown throughout his life, but it was in his last violent lunge to be the heir he thought was wanted, his mad scrambling to follow in his father's and his brother's footsteps and therefore prove he also was a true son, that horrors had spilled out. The abandonment of his own temperament to pursue an ideal he could never reach.

If he had not tried to be as great a prince as his brother, if he had been content to suit better with lesser company and to never overstep his inglorious talents, might he have lived happily? Might he have never learned the terrible truth of his unbelonging? Had not there been times when he accomplished feats of unquestionable value with the very capacities his brethren scorned, when he was called temperate by his father and it was not the insult but the virtue that was meant? Contentment could come from such things, if one was willing to be satisfied by them. If one abandoned one's ambitions for equality, forgot but both of you were born to be kings.

Raised a prince of Asgard for all of his life, could blood be so much stronger than culture? It was not even whispered, but spoken loudly that the blood of Odin once ran thick with that of giants. Whether such a thing could be believed, and what it should mean if it were, was not a question his generation had devoted any time to pondering. Enemy was enemy and this enemy was monstrous. His parents and his masters had told him only of the glory and rightness of their victories, of his solemn duty to continue the legacy when the peace was threatened again. The Jotun were bloodthirsty, covetous, they would arise and grasp at the weak, and all princes were born to guardianship; the inevitable war was more a birthright than the unlikely throne for Odin's second son.

'Not for nothing is he called Allfather. All's Father he is.'

'But he is my father.'

'That is different, Your Highness. There are many sonships. There is blood, there is fealty, there is magic. You are all, that is your privilege and your burden.'

'Only me. He's my father.'

'And your brother's, Your Highness. Thor is the first born.'

'I hate that word.'

'Because it is not for you. But you must not be greedy. Wisdom is not selfish.'

Lessons not listened to, lies not unlearned.

Odin so-called Allfather had said nothing in Loki's lifetime to contradict what all Asgard clearly knew about the barbarity of the Jotun. Odin who spoke of peace and joining only when it was
beyond reach, when his pet changeling slipped his leash and discovered that he only lived to be a
hidden trump card, in case the giants ever tried to crawl from beneath Asgard's boot. As if Odin
would have ever willingly tarnished the Eternal Realm by wedding it with that of monsters.

*Mother knew and still she knelt to him and called him King and Son and family.*

*Queen Frigga the Soft-heart, who held a wolf to her breast and called it a lamb.*

*So much I understand now, so much I never will.*

But was he truly doomed in birth or was he merely broken? Did the poison of his strangeness come
from the womb and seed from which he sprang- how could it be said to if Odin himself were
likewise tainted- and was his upbringing just, or generous, or as unfair as he had once imagined? If
he asked the Norns, would they say it was all in his own hands and he could have walked
differently? Could anyone walk another path than they had once chosen? It seemed to him that the
threads of his destiny were woven before he had taken his first breath, he was *fated* to die abandoned
and unmourned in a frozen wasteland. In spite of everything, he still would; the calamity of his entire
life just the death throes of the fly caught in the spider's web.

Could Thor have grown to be a worthy king when he felt the weight of the crown bear down upon
his heart? If Loki had not interfered to preserve the realm and gratify his jealousies, would his brother
have proven even half as intrinsically worthy as banishment forced him to become? Had his
existence mattered in any particular- had he changed anything except for the worse?

'*No murder is justified, my son. War can be. Conflate them not.*'

He saw now his own childishness, as great as Thor's, and wondered if he could have helped it if he
had turned inward the same discernment that he trained so long on his brother. The crushing, ugly
honesty which his envy and resentment had saved for Thor alone- was any man able to see himself
so clearly?

Even with the worst poison of his madness washed out by resignation and understanding and terrible
new self-awareness, he still could not fathom its ultimate source.

*Am I a monster or not?*

If not by blood, then by action against that blood. If by blood, then action was irrelevant.

*I only tried to finish his work for him, accomplish his final glory. I only endeavoured to belong to
him. I only thought...*

*I don't want it to be my fault.*

But would it not be worse to think he had no soul at all?

*At least I would have chosen. Is choosing so wrongly better than no choice?*

*Which truly makes a monster?*

*•••••••••*

His whole being was afire with unspeakable pain. Pain which came from somewhere outside of his
mind for the first time in several eternities. He was entering a heaven, hurtling towards a firmament:
soon it would be finished.
Dead and punished, and no one had needed to do it. His unwise passions burned up, his placeless existence extinguished, his sins remembered the only burden that would be left to those who had claimed to love him.

He could not regret that.

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He lay, unmoving, in the crater where he had fallen for three days and three nights. Snow drifted over him, the warmth of his own breath forming icy clouds which filled his vision and obscured the dark vista of unfamiliar stars. For three days and three nights he was still and thought of nothing and marvelled at his body's gross failure to break when his heart and his mind had given so easily. An irony for he who had thought his mind so much greater than his might.

At last, he was forced to accept that he had gone on living in spite of his every readiness to die.

And so he rose.
Salve

It had been almost a year since her sojourn among the gods.

Jane had never previously believed that her life could be radically altered by a brief meet cute and a whirlwind adventure full of hijinks and heroism—she didn't think much of that kind of romantic comedy, to be perfectly honest—but here she was, living a life forever changed because some guy had accidentally stumbled into it. For three days.

Of course, he was a superhuman, possibly immortal, technically alien guy, and they hadn't fallen into True Love Forever or run towards each other across an airport after a last minute epiphany or anything.

So there was that.

Not that she could have really held it against herself if she had fallen hard for Thor, even in three days. He was pretty much a literal knight in shining armour, and he had the comportment to match. He was the human (or Asgardian, rather) avatar of all her dreams about the endless possibilities of the unexplored universe, and his very existence was proof that her wildest and most daring theories were plausible. He had a huge home team advantage in winning her heart. Without even getting into the whole blond Adonis with sparkly, summer-sky-blue eyes part.

But she was a grown woman and getting super giggly and really liking the guy were not love, and emotional outbursts fuelled by extreme circumstances were not a good basis for a lasting relationship. She had no expectations about what they would mean to each other in the future.

If she ever even saw him again. It was kind of academic at this point.

She did have an unbelievable, charming memory of being swept off her feet, and she'd probably never have to deal with the harsh reality that jocks with hero complexes were not her type, there were issues underlying most societies with chivalric codes, and that she and Thor were unimaginably unlikely to have anything in common after the wonder and giggles wore off.

This way, with a kiss goodbye and a promise that he might not be able- but definitely intended- to keep, the wonder didn't have to wear off.

It was enough for her to know that her research was absolutely heading somewhere and somewhere worthwhile. Somewhere actually totally, ridiculously incredible. No one had that in her field. The certainty, the marvellous certainty, definitely provided a balm for all the years of academic embarrassment, the alienation and frustration, the being called either a surprisingly young crackpot or a surprisingly old naïf.

Jane considered herself pretty grounded, really. Maybe she was a little impulsive, but her head was in the stars not the clouds.

Not that the research was going particularly amazingly great just at the moment, but at least it was going on in a well-funded manner. At least Erik was with her and she wasn't entirely by herself staring at data until it blurred, kludging together equipment that only half worked, trying to get colleagues to substantiate her hunches over the phone without asking revealing questions, and beginning to wonder if anything was really out there or if the sleep deprivation and Darcy's coffee were finally rotting her mind.

She'd learned that a girl should not science in isolation for too long at a stretch, and she should
definitely not then try to explain her totally valid and realistic theories of possible inter-dimensional, almost certainly intra-dimensional, wormhole travel to a poli-sci major who hates math.

It was probably silly and sentimental of her to think so, but she suspected part of the decline in her progress might be traceable to Darcy's needing to go back to classes and normality in the city in a few days. The stimulating aggravation, growing fondness, and occasional stunning insight Darcy cheerfully provided was well worth the so-strong-it'll-roll-you coffee she made.

Jane might even miss her coffee, when it came to it.

A knock on the wall of her trailer broke her thoughtful stupor, and she startled so violently that she smashed her hand into the cupboard at the edge of her tiny bed. Yes, this was about the size of Jane's life lately. Getting sadder and more clumsy all the time.

"Yeah?" she called, shaking the injured hand and wincing to herself.

Darcy's muffled voice answered, "There's a guy here."

She stuck her head out the door. "Guy? What guy? One of those SHIELD guys?" Jane wanted nothing to do with any more SHIELD guys on her turf. She preferred they stick to the telephone and mailing her cheques. The cheques she was fine with. Even if nothing came of the project that they were interested in, they still owed her for pain and suffering.

Darcy was popping her gum in her usual impossibly relaxed fashion, shaking her head no. "Umm, I don't think he's just a SHIELD guy. He's wearing what has to be a bespoke designer suit and he's, like, unrealistically good-looking. I mean at the- I mean, he's not the same type, but he's at a Thor-like level. You should be open to variety, Jane, especially god-like variety. I don't know what he wants, but he can have it if he's asking me."

She grabbed hold of Jane's sweater and tugged her off the trailer steps. "Go check it out before he has to go back to the Hugo Boss walk-off or whatever."

Jane smoothed her hair and shook the worst of the cereal crumbs out of her cardigan as she walked toward the lab. It was probably good to seem at least as professional as any given reclusive mad scientist from a monster movie. The guy might be one of those eccentric billionaires she was convinced had to exist to be helping fund SHIELD's barrage of weirdness-detecting equipment. In which case, she should try to make a good impression and maybe cut out the middle man.

She saw him before she was even half way there, silhouetted in the centre of her odd little open-concept lab, and a shiver of nerves went through her. Why couldn't strangers in ominous dark suits call first and warn people they were coming? The men in black had already shut down her operation once. She told herself to get a grip and reached for the door-handle. He turned around to look at her as she came in.

Well, he was certainly striking. Very tall with long, lean limbs and perfect posture, he had an effortless natural poise that made him seem sort of stately. This was someone more than used to the finer things in life, she'd bet, probably old money. The obviously expensive suit and full-length overcoat he wore were the kind of definitive black you rarely saw in fabric, a coal-edge black. Even his hair, all smoothed back from his face and combed practically to a point at the nape of his neck, was so black it was almost blue with the sun on it. The contrast made his pale skin look startlingly white and his large, grey-blue eyes seem almost colourless. Like mirrors.
He lacked the warm, inviting handsomeness she remembered in Thor, the quality of his beauty having instead a certain chilly severity to it, but Jane could still see why Darcy had drawn a comparison. Something in the degree of his charisma, something in how he held himself, also reminded her of their otherworldly house guest. Besides, as she took in the painfully sharp edges of his cheekbones and how the vaguely triangular slope of his archless eyebrows gave his neutral expression a melancholic cast, she decided he looked more vulnerable than aloof. A little fragile.

"Hi," she said, feeling impossibly awkward now that she'd had this thought about him. Men didn't appreciate that kind of sentiment, generally.

"Hi," he repeated, tonguing the word too deliberately, like he didn't make a habit of using it. "Jane Foster?"

She flushed, embarrassed that she hadn't thought to introduce herself. "Um, yes. And you are?"

"Luke Wodenson, Dr. Foster. My apologies for the intrusion." He made to take her hand, but at entirely the wrong angle for a handshake. Seeming to catch himself off of her expression, he just splayed his fingers in a kind of contrite wave and dropped his hand again, muttering, "Beg pardon," like he felt like the biggest idiot who had ever lived.

He sounded not a little like a Jane Austen mini-series. His accent might have been even a bit more posh than Thor's was, come to think of it, which hardly seemed possible. For a moment she felt an outrageous suspicion building. "Where are you from, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Swaziland," he said with the air of a man who knew you wouldn't have a clue what he was talking about, "it's in Africa. Ex-British protectorate."

"Oh." She blinked. The suspicion passed. Jane admonished herself for getting too caught up in conspiracy land lately. "I'm sorry, what did you want with me, exactly?"

"I read about you in *Les étoiles scientifique*. I'm something of an amateur astronomer, I'm afraid, and something rather more of a semi-casual student of quantum mechanics." This was all smooth as silk and his slightly shy smile was winsome as all get-out. He'd thought about this, rehearsed it maybe. She felt oddly floaty. "I think you have hit upon one of the dangling threads which can unravel the untold secrets of the universe, Dr. Foster. I would like to offer my services to you, in any capacity which you require assistance."

"Really."

He looked the tiniest bit thrown by her nonplussed reaction, uncertain of himself. "Yes."

"Do you have any formal qualifications?" She seriously had to be dreaming this; the universe could not expect her to believe something so helpful would just happen, no strings.

"I attended Oxford University for a little less than two terms."

"And you read?"

"Physics."

Jane stared at him, not knowing what the hell to say, and wishing he'd lean against something or slouch instead of standing so ram-rod straight. She was used to a lot of people being taller than her and wasn't usually intimidated by it, but with his rigid posture he was not just tall, he was towering. Standing at a polite conversational distance was giving her a crick in the neck, and his formal stance was making her tense. "Uh, come with me, would you? Just over here." She gestured him over to the
kitchen table they had on the far side of the lab and towards a chair. Her plan had been to stand while he sat and get the high ground for a while, but he seemed to have no intention of sitting before she did. So she did, and then he did: his legs so long that he had to cross them at the ankles, camp fire-style, to fit his knees under the table. For Pete's sake.

"Okay. Um, Luke. I'm just... no one ever takes my theories seriously. It does all sound kind of crazy when you say it out loud, even to me. Why are you here? Be totally honest."

He met her eyes and there was something in his expression which suggested to her that he didn’t actually know the answer, but he glanced down and the fan of his eyelashes masked the clarity she’d just glimpsed.

"Miss Foster, your thoughts are almost wholly original, unparalleled in their boldness. You are an intensely intriguing scientist with a perhaps world-changing discovery in your grasp. I am a life-long hobbyist, I crave the novel. Do you begrudge me my instinct to seize upon the most potentially interesting opportunity I have ever come across?"

Jane frankly didn't know what to think. Was he trying to imply he was willing to give her crackpot ass the benefit of the doubt because he was being smothered in ennui and he had a crush on her brain? She'd think he was seriously nefarious, but she could taste the truth of what he was saying about chasing novelty. That part she unquestioningly believed. In addition to which, she might add, the last time she had impulsively trusted someone saying something crazy it had been completely true and everything had been pretty awesome. In the traditional sense of the word.

"Why didn't you finish Oxford?" she asked. Sensibly.

He ticked his chin to the side, his mouth pursing in brief disdain. "I became bored."

How had she known he was going to say that.

"The span of my attention is very great when its object is worthwhile," he added, borderline defensively.

She smiled at him, mildly charmed by his apparent insecurity in spite of his fancy clothes and his posturing. "Luke, here's the thing, some kinda heavy stuff is at stake in my work and there are interested parties who worry I might not be crazy. I kind of need to know that I can trust the people around me. And here's you, apparently a rich, super-smart anonymous guy with no day job in the way who just wants to help. I mean, should I be reporting someone for a poorly-planned attempt at scientific espionage?"

He stared at her, his lips in a tight, unhappy line. "I could acquire a 'day job', if it would make you more comfortable."

"Where does your money come from?" She blushed at her own bluntness and played with her hair as she avoided his eyes. "I know that's a super rude question, but I'm serious. I sort of have to ask. You seem more than a little too good to be true. I'm losing my grad student this week and everything would be so much more convenient if there were someone..."

His upraised hand drove all words from her mouth. He seemed to take her obedience for granted, because he was already talking, "To answer your question, Miss Foster, I am independently wealthy. It is not obscene, but my parents left me an adequate living. They were killed. At home. In Africa."

Jane bit her lip. She should ask for proof of some kind, but either he was a brilliant actor or there was real pain in his voice. And he was obviously trying to cover it, veins stood out on his elegant hands
as his fingers clenched around the word 'killed'.

"I'm sorry."

He gave a weak smile, looking at the floor. "As am I, Miss Foster."

She should at least ask him how they died, but she knew she wasn't going to. "Please call me Jane."

"Jane," he said, surprising her. She would have thought he was the type to whom the invitation would have made no difference. He seemed so formal, so tightly laced. So ill at ease.

Then again, he had stopped calling her 'doctor' when he started complimenting her.

"And now you... what? Sit around reading scientific journals and hoping for something amazingly interesting to fall into your lap?"

"Something like that." He grinned at her suddenly and it made his eyes spark in a way she wasn't entirely sure she liked. "I wouldn't say I sat around. More interesting things tend to happen when you make them happen, don't they, Jane?"

The impulse to ask him what he would know about it was strong- but he didn't know anything, even if he was a science spy and thought he did. Unless he worked for SHIELD after all. No one else in the world could possibly know anything.

"Did I not read in your author blurb that you once caused three hundred thousand dollars worth of damage to your undergraduate biochem laboratory because you ignored the express precautions of an experiment in order to 'see what would happen'?" Now his eyes twinkled playfully at her, and this she did like.

"The damage wasn't that bad."

His close-mouthed smile gave him ridiculously endearing dimples, and she found herself wondering how old he was. She couldn't begin to guess and would have believed anything from twenty-one to thirty-five.

"It's the truth!" she protested against the knowingness of the smile. "My professor exaggerated the whole accident so the school would give him more money than the repairs cost and he could get better equipment than the junk he was replacing."


"Let him have it. It's not like that's the thing that's ruining my reputation."

"Let him have it. It's not like that's the thing that's ruining my reputation."

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his much larger one. The slight touches of his slender fingers were cool against her skin and tingled alarmingly. He leaned forward and her attention shot back to his face, his pale eyes. "Let me help you, Jane. Whatevsoever I lack in patience and formal education, I promise you I make it up with cleverness. Keenness."

"And modesty?" She wanted to kick herself for throwing out that mouldy old chestnut.

"My mind is my one gift and I am certain of it. As I am certain of you. I believe in your work, Jane. That is the truth."

Damn it, this was too weird for tact. "Why are you so desperate to be involved?"

His mouth opened, but he paused and shut it again, his fine brows knit with consternation as he
studied her. A moment passed, then he sighed through the fingers of the free hand which had come up to cover his mouth, his index finger worrying his Cupid's bow. "Alas- in very painful honesty indeed, Miss Foster- I have nothing else to do in all the world."

"Jane," she said again, feeling vindicated.

"Jane."
Consultation

Darcy still thought it was a fantastic development, the interference of perfect serendipity rescuing Jane from the oncoming tragic loneliness of a life without Darcy in it. She conceded that Luke was awfully mysterious, that there was definitely something strange about him, and that he had arrived with suspiciously convenient timing, but she thought these were relatively minor points. In light of her departure and Jane's ensuing sadness, there had to be priorities.

"Jane, you once made out with a Norse god of thunder. How normal can your life really be, after that? I think you're marked for all time. Touched by Vorlons."

Jane turned a corner and shot Darcy a look as her signal clicked off. "Whatever that means."

"Didn't we have this conversation the last time?" Erik was pretty mad about what he saw as history repeating. In his own quiet, white-lipped, Erik way, he'd been fuming. Days into the argument, he was just getting madder. "Do we remember what happened then?"

Darcy hummed in thought and shook her head. "I thought that turned out pretty awesomely except for SHIELD managing to lose my iPod and nothing else, then trying to tell me it wasn't on purpose. Coulson smirks when he lies. I almost punched him."

"It did not turn out 'awesomely', Darcy," Erik was not budging from the topic at hand, "And the fact that it didn't turn out a lot worse is not because it wasn't a terrible idea."

"Which part?" Jane threw in, not meeting his eyes in the rear-view mirror even though she could feel the reflected heat of his glare.

She did catch a glimpse of his deep frown and the thundercloud brewing on his brow. "Everything after I told you to stay away from that guy and you didn't. Maybe some of the stuff before that."

Jane huffed. Thor had turned out to be noble and heroic and super nice, not to mention telling the truth and not at all crazy. So Erik was still completely wrong even if she probably should have listened to him. Her instincts must be decent, because what were the odds? "It's because of that terrible idea that we all still have jobs. And funding. And any hope of this research ever seeing the light of day and being something other than a laughingstock when it does," was all she said.

"Don't tell him the truth." Erik was using his most serious of serious faces.

"Not right away," Darcy agreed.

Erik clutched his brow. "Darcy-"

Her hand went up in the universal sign language for 'not listening'. "What if they get serious? She can't be lying to him about something this big. Eventually it will come out, probably because Thor shows up randomly the day before their wedding and thinks he's still in like Flynn. It'll be drama-city and betrayal and angst. Jane will be all devastated. Giant huge enormous mess."

"Darcy!"

"Don't look at me like you're not going to fall for him! You've been moping over Thor and your Einstein-wormhole-whatever machine going bust for months, and you're bored to death. You're barely even working any more. This guy was lovingly sculpted out of rainbows and bunnies and smarts by your fairy godmother to be both exactly your perfect type and exactly what you
legitimately need right now for your super-important science stuff. The universe has clearly aligned itself specially just to get you out of this funk, and no one should fight the universe, Jane."

There were no words.

Apparently of the opinion that they just weren't getting it, she reiterated her point, "The Thor thing would never have worked out long-term, you're hung up because you totally know that and it bums you out, and suddenly his staggeringly hot exact opposite wanders into your life begging you to talk science to him? Hello? That is not a coincidence."

"Darcy, if you don't stop talking, I will plug the hole." Jane knew her cheeks were even redder than Darcy's lipstick, and she stared determinedly at the road ahead.

"I'm gonna miss you guys." Darcy smiled beatifically at them both, her eyes shiny with feeling. "Bros for life."

They were almost at the bus station, too. Jane was not going to cry. She was not losing her lovably grating, hilariously practical assistant, because Darcy would torture her again the following summer. This was just a hiatus until their further adventures.

"For life," she agreed, totally not crying. She could hear Erik sighing heavily in the back.

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When she pulled up to the lab after dropping Erik outside the dingy basement apartment a local had been nice enough to rent him, it was only just lunchtime and she was planning on making the rest of the day a little vacation for herself and some Ben & Jerry's. She needed the comfort and probably the calories, as she seemed to be worrying herself out of her favourite jeans. It was just possible that man was not designed to run on coffee alone. Maybe Darcy was right about this funk she wasn't in. Maybe it was getting kind of bad. It was true about the work slipping, too, she was barely pulling eight hour days of late: all desk jockeying. It wasn't like her.

As she got out of the van, however, she immediately knew that her afternoon would not be as uneventful as she had planned.

Luke sat on the concrete lip of the overgrown planter out front, his elbows resting on his parted knees and his hands clasped between them. His head came up as she approached and he squinted at her against the desert sun. She guessed it was in concession to the heat that his full-length overcoat was off and folded neatly beside him, but he still wore a black wool suit and he didn't look as though he felt one bit discomfited by the soaring temperature or the glaring sun. She thought the shivery material of his shirt must be actual silk, a terrifically clingy fabric in the presence of moisture, but it floated as diaphanously over his broad shoulders and slim chest as if he were a boutique mannequin rather than flesh and blood. Some people must have fewer sweat glands. Or none. It was the only answer. Darcy usually looked annoyingly fresh in the desert, too. Not that Darcy wore silk and wool. There madness lay.

"Jane Foster," he said by way of greeting, smiling slightly as she reached him. "It occurred to me that at our first meeting I said I would await your word, but I gave you no means by which to send it. I hope I haven't disrupted you in your duties?"

It took a second to parse what he'd said, then she waved away the polite concern. "Not at all. I'm kind of taking the day off. Wanna come in?"

Now was that smart, Jane? The mysterious dude just shows up again and you invite him in knowing
that you're all by yourself and no one will be coming to check on you until at least tomorrow? Jane.
We've got to fix this decision making, Jane. Erik would have an utter cow if he knew.

"I would be most honoured," he said, bowing his head as he gestured her ahead of him to the door.

She set about unlocking it, but she was still busily regretting the impulsiveness she was beginning to
recognise was bound to get her into trouble one of these days. If it hadn't already. She was far too
curious about this overly formal, overly smart, overly helpful weirdo to make a sensible decision and
tell him to gather some credentials for a few months, then maybe they'd talk. Like she'd been far too
curious about unexpected stellar phenomena and what a person-shaped shadow was doing inside of
it, about that person himself. Just because that hadn't ended badly, she found herself taking up Erik's
mantra, didn't mean she could keep her messed up priorities.

Curiosity, the cat, etc.

He did look so forlorn, though, when she caught him out of the corner of her eye. Forlorn and tense.
She wanted to know why he supposedly didn't have anything else to do, why this was important to
him in a way that it had previously been important only to her. What did he see in the project? Was it
what she saw?

It wasn't like she didn't realise he was hiding something. She'd just keep an eye on him. She really
needed someone new to talk to who was close enough to her level that they could point out things
that her months of intense focus had blurred beyond seeing. Fresh eyes without too many
preconceptions.

Jane went about turning on the lights and the kitchen fan, aware of Luke somewhere behind her. He
had a way of lurking just on the edge of her vision that was mildly disconcerting. He was a large
presence, figuratively as well as physically, but his personal magnetism seemed slightly off. His
graceful, dramatic figure and penetrating, measuring gaze drew attention, but his closed body
language and forebodingly chilly manner also repelled it; so you looked at him but your eyes slid
away quickly. He was like a lone grey cloud at the edge of a perfect blue sky.

Now she felt uncharitable.

"Would you like some tea?" Jane could not make coffee. She'd flooded the counter three times and
then Darcy had said she wasn't allowed to touch the machine again until she'd been to see someone
about the Voodoo curse under which she was obviously living.

Startled from his examination of the Energizer Bunny wind-up toy he'd found on her desk, he stared
at her a moment. "Beg pardon? Tea?"

"I've got regular or some herbal kinds without caffeine. Fruit and mint and things."

He looked almost annoyed, but his tone was unfailingly polite, "I will take what I am given."

Well. That was a pretty winning attitude in an assistant, she had to say.

Finally settling them at the table with steaming mugs and some crackers she'd dug up, she looked
over at her strange caller. He smiled mysteriously, and she started waffling again about whether it
was a good idea to keep letting strangers into her lab. She was like a crazy cat lady, adopting the
town strays. Except both of her strays were tall, handsome men who gave off- in different flavours-
the air of being Totally Able to Take Care of Themselves. Still, somehow, she felt a certain
responsibility. Much less so for Luke than Thor, obviously, but she had a similar feeling that he
might not be Okay Out There if she didn't help him find his feet. At least she hadn't hit him with the
"Have you considered my proposal, Jane Foster?" Luke was asking, giving her what he probably imagined was a pleasantly curious look over the top of his tea cup, but which seemed to her more like a cat who knew you had bacon on your plate and who was too proud to beg.

She decided to stall. "What did you have in mind? For you to do, I mean. For me."

"Whatever duty you require of me, I should be pleased to perform, Jane. I am prepared to follow you most slavishly. However, I think it would be in our mutual best interest for me to help you direct your research at its most fundamental levels into avenues you may not have considered. The new interpretation of basic concepts and their application in light of your theory, which would change in cascade all previous exegesis of observed data. I have tremendous imagination, Jane. A quality which, perhaps, has been lacking?" He spread his hands on the table and she eyed the outward splay of his long fingers, like a spider's web against the linoleum. "Your ambition and desire have driven you to great insight and given you the purpose to pursue it, but perhaps you are still tethered overmuch to the earth? To a certain 'way'. Is that so?"

After a moment he raised his eyebrows and she realised it was an actual question he was expecting her to answer.

"Maybe," she hedged, not given to self-reflection. She wasn't particularly offended by the idea that she wasn't radical enough, either because it might be a bit ass-backwardly true or because she'd spent so much time trying to defend herself as not being very radical at all if you'd just give her a chance please listen it's not like I'm saying there are Atlantians among us- fine! I'll take this to a competing journal!

There was no point in getting pissed off until she'd established whether Luke's supposition had any validity.

However, he didn't know that she hadn't just made the leap to believing in the viability of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge as a theoretical concept, she'd also been quick to the idea that the bridge could actually lead Somewhere Else and that Someone could come across it. That took kind of a lot of imagination for a scientist raised in her academic climate, or really most academic climates. Well, it took courage anyway. The lingering dogma of logical positivism still haunted her quite often. It was occasionally an effort to remember that she wasn't crazy and openness to the unexpected was what science was all about.

It didn't stop it stinging that she was technically a True Believer and might need to rethink her stance on alien abduction stories.

She had empiric evidence, of course, but habitual trains of thought died hard. And she didn't like to think of Thor as 'an alien', per se, even though it had to be conceded. She'd made out with an alien.

"I think I've got a lot of imagination," she said. "But I could definitely use a different way of looking at things."

"You have laboured almost alone for a long time."

Jane nodded. Glancing out the glass walls to the horizon, she quietly added, "Not the best way to work."

There was a silence.

He stared down at his hands in his lap for a long moment, his right thumb rubbing over his index
finger anxiously, his angular face slightly pinched. "You are thinking of accepting me, then?"

"I'm thinking of it."

His eyes were huge with some subtle emotion when he looked up, turned an icy pure blue by the sunlight hitting them. "My mother once told me that instinct is born perfect, until the habits of deliberation learned by the childish mind corrupt it. In maturity, we seek only to hear again the truth of will our upbringing has tainted. I see very little corruption in you."

Jane didn't know what to say for a second. "Are you telling me to follow my heart?"

Luke seemed a bit amused, though his tone remained serious, "I am suggesting that your first impulse, whatever it may have been, was likely the correct course. Because I suspect you have never taught your impulses to be wrong. A young child knows what it wants. An adolescent thinks he does and is mistaken. A man is never certain."

"First I have no imagination and now I'm immature? You're not making friends here."

He didn't rise to it, merely smiling coyly at her.

"You're pretty weird, do you know that?"

He looked pained. "I have learned it, yes. It is not something I expect to be able to correct."

She had to laugh and he eyed her warily. "Stop trying," she said sincerely, "weird is good."

"I shall endeavour to accept it- under your tutelage?" he added, hopefully.

He was right, though. She'd never spent enough time second guessing herself to get a complex into her instincts. She was a damn the torpedoes kind of girl. Always had been. That was the whole reason she was here in the middle of nowhere working on something mad that had turned into something impossible which had turned into this ridiculous meeting. Everything in her life was way too far left of normal for her to ever start being sensible.

"Sure," she said, shrugging. "When do you start?"

After all, she found herself rationalising, if it all went screaming to hell and he was some kind of spy or crazy person, she could totally count on SHIELD sticking its nose in to rescue her. That was, perhaps, the one upside to having a shady government agency interesting itself far too much in your research.
The compromise with Erik and her own, admittedly underdeveloped, sense of caution involved a few limitations on her new assistant. Such as not reading Luke in on the most radical parts of the project and feeling out his responses to it a little bit at a time before they committed to giving him enough information to help with current problems or participate in data gathering. The new, scary, mind-bendy research being at something of an impasse anyway, Jane actually enjoyed going back over the progress she'd made on her own. Before Norsemen started raining from the sky.

Jane also felt it was safe to show Luke her old data from the stellar events she'd been observing when the whole thing had not yet taken a turn for the legendary, but it was difficult to hold back the rest once she did. It was like giving him the build up and no punchline. He took everything in so quickly in their first meetings, his questions weird or basic but very rare, and his understanding much deeper than she could have anticipated from an amateur. He seemed to struggle with terminology and some of the rote math, but never with concepts or applications, including applications she hadn't fathomed. Within a week, the discussions were getting longer and there were tangential things he was explaining to her. He seemed to hate showing his work in full, quickly growing impatient with the process of laying foundations or supporting his intuitive leaps. There were rudimentary mathematical symbols he didn't even seem to know, but he doodled illustratively as he spoke to her in figurative rather than technical language, and she eventually found his meanings reasonably clear. Usually his left hand would sketch diagrams and orbitals on the whiteboard while his right would flail in gestures or add notations, sometimes it was the other way around. She found his unthinkingly flexible manual dexterity less interesting than the oddly narrow, spiky, un-slanted printing it produced, and that less interesting than what he was trying to communicate with it.

She wondered how someone could so fully grasp the implications of incredibly complex abstract theorems about the nature of matter, but have no idea of entry-level expressions of physical laws. Basic formulae mystified him, but with the variables plugged in he was faster than a calculator. He lacked a lot of her specialised knowledge, but that seemed to be because he had avoided specialisation; he remained equally literate as they drifted further out of her purview, while she was sometimes confronted by problems she had never studied.

When they started arguing about whether the theoretical Einstein-Rosen bridge would be like a tunnel through space-time made of same-universe matter differing only in type rather than kind (a 'short cut', as Jane derisively called it when he started defending the hypothesis) or like a doorway to a legitimately alternate, smaller dimension and back out again, he began at last to come unwound from the tightly controlled coil of formality he'd been in since she'd met him.

"There is one world to live in, if one speaks of 'the world' as all interconnected cosmic reality. There are ways through it, where it is possible to walk between the position and the thrust of a single electron, but-"

"The Uncertainty Principle as a basis for faster-than-light travel through wormholes?" Jane's incredulous tone was cutting. "That's word salad, Luke."

"Do not interrupt." His voice was shockingly deep when he was annoyed. It got closer and closer to a straight up growl the more he lost his patience with her. That was not something she would have expected from such a genteel man, one who practically oozed urbane sophistication, and the incongruity was in danger of making her laugh. Not that it wasn't also very successfully intimidating, because it was. Especially the way his glare would bore into her skull as he grumbled at her in that borderline menacing tone. He had real personal intensity. Super-intensity, even. More than once, she
had felt a tension ache building across her shoulders just from being in the same room with his unyielding focus.

He tossed his blazer over the back of a chair and primly rolled up his shirtsleeves as he extrapolated on her wrongness about many worlds and string theory, getting close and talking in a low pitched yelling-whisper. Jane had to suppress the urge to giggle inappropriately in her discomfort when his temper started to slip, but she was used to fighting about science with much scarier people, and she was unwilling to stop him before he got where he was going. He was half into the broad consequences of causal efficacy in the conscious mind before he realised he was drifting too far from her area of expertise for her to properly appreciate the point he was trying to make.

Then he'd looked borderline sheepish. The day was stupidly hot and the lab didn't have proper air conditioning, but the heat had never yet seemed to touch him and she was sure it had nothing to do with the blotchy flush rising in his cheeks and down his milk-pale forearms.

They retreated to opposite sides of the lab to read, she going through her notes, he poring over one of the many textbooks she'd dug out for him. The silence stretched until it felt unbreakable and Jane sprawled across her desk, deciding she might as well be comfortable if he wasn't going to get over himself enough to continue the conversation. Or to apologise again. He apologised to her a lot, always with this wary look in his eyes like he was afraid he'd be left destitute in the science-less cold if she minded anything. This was the first time she'd managed a proper rise out of him. Not that she had been trying.

When she next looked up, evening had long since fallen. She stretched out her stiff muscles and glanced over to find him still propped up over a book. He was precariously perched, cross-legged on top of his chair, and only slightly rumpled by the passing hours. His mercilessly scraped back hair had begun to lift away from his neck in rebellious half-curls, gaining fluff and body as it escaped from whatever product had ironed it down to his scalp. When he pushed a hand through it, it fell long around his face and an errant wave slid across his high, imperious forehead. He looked so young and so vulnerable that it gave her real pause.

The possibility that he might not even be able to legally drink seemed suddenly plausible enough that she interrupted his obvious concentration to blithely ask him how old he was. She hadn't planned on talking to him after the one-sided argument until he decided to suck it up and talk to her first. She had no problem allowing him his sulk, because it didn't bother her one whit to go back to her notes and she fully expected he would crack quickly. But, now that she wanted to talk, she didn't see the sense in going out of her way to indulge his delusion that she was sulking, too.

Nothing personal at all had passed between them in the week she'd been letting him hang out in her lab and the abrupt, indelicate question apparently stunned him. Even though he presumably remembered Jane's version of tact from their first two conversations. He gaped at her.

"What?"

She was going to say something pithy about worrying she was robbing the cradle, but that phrase had way too many connotations she had no desire to raise. "I just..."

"I don't know," he snapped, scowling at her from beneath furrowed eyebrows. "Why?"

Now Jane was gob-smacked. "What do you mean you don't know?"

His eyes flicked back to the book, then roamed furtively around the room. "In Swaziland, where we lived, we didn't keep close track of the years as you do. The anniversary of one's birth was not marked, nor would the precise moment have been recorded. Time was portioned differently, no
The calendar was kept but the fields and the stars. I was born in my mother's garden, she said once that the acacia was in bloom. Winter." Picking up a pen, he started spinning it between his fingers so quickly that it became a blur. "I could get the approximate year from my passport papers- if it is significant?"

"No, it... no." She folded her arms and leaned on the desk in front of her, trying to work him out. He'd seriously never given her the answer she was expecting to any question she'd asked since the time he bragged that formal education bored him. "Were your parents from there or...?"

"Yes, they-" he paused and glared out the window into the dwindling late-summer twilight. "I was..."

Jane didn't know whether to prompt him or not. She wasn't sure if he'd welcome interruption or if he'd explode. She didn't want to deal with an explosion. She really could use his help around here, and she preferred to avoid the scenario where she kicked him out of the lab for thinking he could walk all over her just because he was upset. If he was upset.

"It doesn't matter." He sighed, slumping slightly, and it looked as though there were the weight of ages dragging down his shoulders.

Jane felt curiosity making suicidal plans for her again. "It sounds to me like maybe it does."

The glare turned toward her and for a moment she knew real fear of him, but it passed almost immediately as he looked down in mixed shame and sadness. Now she was even more invested than before: needing to know, to understand, and her reckless sympathy running rampant. *I have no sense of self-preservation at all. I really do need a babysitter. This person could be anyone and I'm poking him with sticks to see if he'll bite.*

"It..." Luke began, irritably flicking the pen away; at which point it sailed across the room and buried itself in the drywall up to the cap.

"Wow."

"I do apologise, Miss Foster!" He leapt up, his long-fingered hands wringing in embarrassment. "I didn't intend to let- I didn't anticipate the flimsy-"

"Hey now. This is my lab you're talking about."

"Ah-"

Jane had to laugh at the stricken look on his face, but she was feeling less conviction in her belief that he probably wasn't a SHIELD agent. The scientific espionage theory would be looking a lot more plausible, except that she'd been talking science with him for a week and he obviously wasn't a PhD trying to dumb himself down. More like a prodigy trying to catch up. She remembered his speech about imagination and being tied to the Earth and thought that quality was exactly the thing he was talking about. His lack of indoctrination into How Things Were meant that he fearlessly said things which seemed ludicrous, then went on to explain them to her in a way that made compelling sense.

As long as she ignored ten years of education and went on pure instinct.

As long as she filled in his gesticulations with the first principles he apparently understood but didn't know how to communicate.

"Come clean with me, Luke," she found herself saying, gathering her fly-away hair into a messy bun, "were you raised in a secret ninja village?"
His nose wrinkled and that annoyed look was back. "I am not a 'ninja'."

Putting two and two together, Jane had the dawning realisation that his little pained-annoyed looks meant he was confused and so unused to it that it pissed him off. She bit her lip to keep from laughing again. "Okay."

"You call me strange, Jane Foster, but you are hardly straightforward yourself."

She shook her head. "Straightforward is totally what I am. Normal, I don't know. But what you see is kinda what you get."

"As I begin to discover. Why did you ask me about my parents?"

"I just wondered how far the culture went back or if it was something unique to you in your family. I like to know things, I always want to understand, and sometimes I don't think about, you know, manners before I start blurting all my questions out. I'm sorry." She yanked her hand down before she managed to worry her hair free of the bun she'd just put it in.

Unfazed by her wall of verbiage, Luke leaned on the edge of her desk. "Don't be. Your curious nature is your greatest asset, is it not? My biological mother was a British citizen and a kind of diplomat. She died when I was yet in my minority and I was adopted by the mother of a headman, a prominent woman in Swazi society. I am not certain why she took me in, my inheritance could not be accessed until I presented myself in Britain. Whatever her plans for the future once were, I imagine I've thwarted them with my failure to return. You will have guessed already the winding path taken by my education across villages and nations. So you see, I am a culture of one."

"Doesn't that get lonely?" It was out before she could stop it, her interest surpassing her judgement as always.

He smiled wanly, and he didn't look young any more. "I suppose that it must."

"If we somehow forced open an Einstein-Rosen bridge below the atmosphere, would you want to try to cross it? Is that why you're here?"

Luke ran his hand through his hair again, only provoking it into further curls and greater mess. "Jane, I confess to you that..."

"Yes?"

He turned his back to her and sighed. "I don't know."

Jane studied that back, not missing how stiffly the muscles were drawn taut beneath the delicate material of his shirt. "You don't know if you would try the bridge or you don't know why you're here?"

Luke's trapezius twitched and she knew he hadn't been expecting her to pick at his response. Fair enough, she never really pushed him before when he got all quiet and sincere-sounding. It was time to start, she figured.

"They are the same question."

"But you think it can be done, that's what you're getting at when you're trying to tell me about how you think consciousness as a real causal agent relates to quantum mechanics? You have an idea of how to control it, to make it happen."
"Currently there is the problem of it requiring more energy than it is possible for this entire planet to produce by any known method, and how to calculate one's destination with continuous accuracy without a fleet of supercomputers carried along for the trip, but yes. You are entitled to your scepticism, Jane, but my hypothesis is sound. The uncertainty does your work for you like this: The bridge both exists and does not exist. The space between your starting point and your destination both exists and does not exist. This is how you travel it. You cross the space in a minute fraction of the time it actually takes because you are not traversing the space. Even as you are.

"One may walk in the footsteps of uncertainty, precisely because there is one world with many dimensions and not many worlds of one dimension each." He stared at her in utter stillness, looking for all the world like a particularly pensive stone statue. Then his mouth quirked up on one side. "I postulate."

He sounded more sure of himself than a postulation warranted, the light of shared wonder in his eyes.

"Why didn't you just tell me you were bringing in a working theory?" Jane was not going to tell him he was talking more about the quantum observer effect and folds in space-time than technically the uncertainty principle, because it was her fault for using the wrong term earlier (since it didn't seem likely he knew the terminology... probably) and most people made that conflation anyway. You gotta pick your battles, and she had no aching desire to die on the hill of pedantry.

Luke chewed the inside of his lip as he worried at his thumb, and she noted that it seemed to be his most consistent nervous habit for future reference. "I was apprehensive."

"This is about you supposedly having nowhere else to be again, isn't it? Like, I turn you away and somehow you've got nothing to live for and no one else you could possibly talk to." Jane was impatient now with this idea, increasingly she couldn't see herself buying it no matter how well he was selling, and he'd successfully derailed her a time too many. She sometimes gave people the benefit of the doubt to the point of handicap and it had to stop before someone really took advantage. But the stark lines of his thinly-fleshed face made it impossible for her to miss the way he subtly grit his teeth at her dismissal of what she remembered he'd called 'painful honesty, indeed' and her heart actually sank. Jane, you jerk, I think he really believes it. What could possibly be your story, you strange, prickly man?

"Well," Luke's high class accent was extra crisp, a knife-edge of politeness, "whether there is anyone else who would understand or not, are you yourself interested in my thoughts or have I been wasting your time? Dr Foster."

The silkiness of his voice as he added the title reminded her of that scary moment earlier; she decided he was the kind of person who could hold a grudge until the heat death of the universe and not to let him labour under any misapprehensions if she could help it. "I'm sorry."

His disdain for that was obvious and he simply waited for an answer to his question without even bothering to dignify her apology with a dismissive gesture.

"You're not wasting anyone's time."

"Good." He spun around and marched to the chair where he'd hung his blazer, rolling down his shirt sleeves and buttoning his cuffs. Jane had been about to tell him he was the most intuitively brilliant person she'd ever met and that she was incredibly grateful he'd come even if they never agreed on anything, but he didn't seem to want to hear her reassurances. She pretended not to be watching while he pretended he wasn't trying to smooth down his hair (it clung to his fingers and
sprang up in tighter curls with each pass of his hand).

Pulling on his coat, he walked past her and paused at the door. "I will return in the morning to discuss the problem of power and calculations in the absence of probability, you may offer further critique then. I shall endeavour not to burden you with my personal state of affairs in future. I remind you that you did ask."

Yep, she knew it. She took off after him, catching the door before it shut and grabbing his arm. Though he was slimly built, it was more like grabbing braided steel cable than flesh and blood, and her nerves fluttered a bit as she craned her head back to look him in the eye. "Really," she insisted, not wavering her gaze from those silvery blue-grey irises, "I made some assumptions and I'm sorry. I'd like to hear about your personal state of affairs whenever you feel comfortable telling me."

He glared down the length of his Grecian nose at her short fingers and her chipped purple nail polish set against the impeccable black of his sleeve. "Release me, please."

She did, frowning at his distant tone. "I won't let you just be all icy polite from now on, you know. I can't stand on ceremony in my lab. I'll prank you if I have to."

Luke straightened his jacket and glanced over her speculatively, the intensity of his stern manner replaced by a hint of amusement and a condescending smile. "I should very much like to see you try. Good evening, Dr Foster."

Not quite forgiven, then. And a challenge issued.

Why did she get the feeling she was playing with fire?
The first meeting she remembered— the one from which she counted the span of their friendship— took place in the twilight of her childhood, on the cusp of her adolescence. She had known more stars than they, this was obvious to her at once. Taller and sturdier than either prince, she had felt pride and disappointment almost equally. Pride that she was bigger and stronger than they were, even though they were boys, and not just any boys but the princes of the Realm. Disappointment that they were just children like she was and not some more exotic breed of life. Expectation of their majesty had grown to giant proportions in her mind as the importance of her presentation before them was explained to her.

Besides, Sif had heard many tales of Odin's doings and formed impressions of what a prince should be. Small boys standing in a peaceful palace garden, fidgeting and making grabs for a lethargic bumblebee when the Queen's watchful gaze turned away, had not featured in her imagination.

Nonetheless, as she had been relentlessly drilled to do by her mother and by all of her servants, she completed the specific form of the warriors' obeisance that their station demanded. It was a kind of curtsey, halfway to the movement of taking a knee as one would do before the King, and the same clasp of hand to heart with the head down in reverence.

She bowed before Thor first, hearing her mother introduce her to the Queen as a worthy and comely companion to the first-born. Sif's young tongue was only mildly awkward when she delivered her well practised greeting, "Your sword sharp and your arrow straight, Your Highness."

Thor smiled at her as she looked up and in so doing he seemed a shining sun, the halo of his golden hair like an aurora. A child though he was— all chubby cheeks and a sweet, short, upturned nose— his features were strong and his startling, sky-blue eyes were bright with life and laughter. Sif felt the power of his personality as a warmth emanating from his person, and she found herself genuinely smiling back. Now she saw his princeliness, his will; the easy confidence in his stance clearly came as naturally to him as breathing.

Her mother then commended her to the second son, and she repeated the bow. "Your path narrow and your burden light, Your Highness."

Loki did not smile. Not quite. There was a slight quirk of his mouth at the corners and the fleeting impression of tiny dimples in his pale cheeks, but his eyes glittered with apprehension and his lips remained tightly pressed together. Already noticeably more slight and shockingly dark in contrast to his brother's blinding brightness, those marshy grey eyes looked enormous in his slim, pointed face. Where Thor was aptly likened to a lion cub in her mind, she was tempted to compare Loki unfavourably to some small woodland creature.

He touched her hand with his skinny fingers, as if she were a new play thing and he wanted to test her reality and his ownership. "Shall she play with us a long while?" He turned a mournfully entreating expression up to his mother. "Not like the other girls?"

Sif felt chilled by his shy, imploring tone. This was a prince of Asgard?

The Queen ran an elegant, be-ringed hand over her son's unfortunate pitch-black hair. "Sif is not to study to be my handmaiden, Loki. She is to be a warrior alongside you."

The prince turned to look at her again, studying her with disquieting intensity. He touched his fingertips to his lips and drew them away, greenish purple mist swirling then solidifying between his
pointer finger and thumb into a miniature sword in delicate wrought gold. He held it out to her solemnly, his eyes on her long, flaxen curls. "Pin up your hair, or they'll pull it in the practise ring. It hurts."

She looked to her mother, then to the Queen, then took it, bewildered and discomfited. "Thank-you, Your Highness."

He ducked his head and turned to run away from the small gathering, pulling free of his mother's grasp and tossing his stately green cloak to the ground without ceremony. Babyish. She did not like him. He was only a little second son, he couldn't tell her what to do.

She slid the sword-pin into a pocket on her girdle.

Thor had his first of many growth spurts shortly after Sif was formally introduced at court as an apprentice warrior; his head now level with hers and his shoulders already broader, she became his frequent sparring partner. The sole heir of a blood brother to the King, it fell to her to take up the family honour and with it her father's sword. It was not a thing unheard of for an only daughter, but it was rare enough and the fightmasters put her through her paces before they believed she was worth their teaching. Some still had their doubts.

But she was solid and quick and she learnt quickly. Her footwork and technique were always superior to that of her royal training partner, but Thor's swiftly growing strength and greater weight still gave him enough advantage that their bouts were evenly matched.

Loki had not grown and remained small and thin, his dark head and perpetually colour-stained fingers (he was forever drawing) leading her to dub him 'soot' and 'muck-frog' and to chase him around the ring as Thor watched and shrieked with laughter. Little though he was, however, he was faster than the older children and nimble as a cat. He could nearly always outrun her or out climb her until she became too frustrated to follow and stomped off in a fit of temper.

"If you would stop pulling her braid, brother," Thor called up from the base of the tree they were both currently climbing, "she would not seek such vengeance!"

"It's her!" Loki used magic to pull a rope out of thin air and slid down it from somewhere far above her in the canopy of the tree. He was soon just a dark blot next to the light blot of Thor on the distant ground. "She said I was sleeping in the cinders and rolling in the ashes. She said no son of Odin could have ugly black hair."

"She couldn't read the runes on her own sword. She's stupid."

Thor squinted sceptically, not one for academics any more than Sif was and unsympathetic to Loki's repeated attempts to prove his unnatural, musty interests could help win a fight. "Did you change them with magic?"

"She could never read it! She memorised the inscription!"

Bored of the argument, Thor pushed Loki over and tried to pin him. Loki, slippery as an eel, wriggled free and put his brother down with a well-placed kick to the solar plexus. Knowing the fight would turn earnest and that he would definitely lose when it did, he took off toward the palace. Thor blinked after him from the ground until he had regained his breath, then started shouting abuse about cheating and cowardice at Loki's back.
Sif sat in the tree and glared at his retreating figure. It wasn't right for a warrior prince to do such wily magic as he did, to always slide around the edges of a real fight and retreat wherever he could. He was elegant and precise with a practice sword, but he kept his distance and his guard up in spars; he never pushed in for the attack, he never won without sly tricks. He had no love for battle and no aptitude for berserker style, his cool temperament ill-suited to his birth.

He set traps for her and tricked her into saying mortifying things, he ran away from her just anger and set more traps still. He mocked her in their lessons, even in front of the Queen. He sometimes allowed her to persist in humiliating misunderstandings when he helped her with her studies. It couldn't be denied that he did almost always help, his quick mind and gift for words making him an invaluable if impatient tutor. He carved her flowers out of ice, he spun her dragons from sugar, once in a great while he jested and she laughed in spite of herself.

It was a real question in her mind whether he had honour. Whether he were worthy for his station. Whether they were friends.

He had been among the Elves, studying magic, for much longer than she had thought. Not having much missed him after the first few shocks of his absence, she had lost track of the stars and herself in a comfortable routine. She finally had Thor's complete attention, undivided by his secret amusements with his brother and the annoyingly impenetrable conversations the two would have, giggling together like a pair of old gossips. The Loki whom Thor praised to her, that Loki who was forever witty and cunning and sportsmanlike in games of both mind and body, did not much resemble the sullen, quiet, quick to offence, and boringly bookish little boy with whom she was acquainted.

He was playful to her only in cruel games, though she still pursued them. She reasoned that at least he was the best possible person to get into such a one-upmanship contest with, because he never tattled to his parents or his tutors. She'd blacked his eyes and drawn his blood, but when the Queen would ponder his injuries in dismay, he kept his lip steadfastly buttoned. Sif did the same the day he accidentally broke her arm knocking her from a fence, though he had wanted to try to heal it himself with his magic and this had provoked a screaming row the like of which they'd never had before. Thor, in the middle, had tried uselessly to placate both sides. It had only ended, after Loki's tirade about the thickness of her skull, with Sif's proclamation that the touch of a cowardly witch like him would dishonour her arm forever. Loki had stormed away in silence, white-faced with rage.

He had left for his training only days later. Things were still frostier than their wont, but he had come to take his leave of her all the same. He said he must go to the Elves to meet with adequate instruction, elaborating grandly about his innate magical abilities being the greatest on Asgard since his father's childhood many ages ago. She had dismissed this as his vanity. He was jealous of his brains and his magic, hoarding his small, unenvied gifts, resentful of she and Thor for their bravery, their honour, and their fair hair. He'd called her a flaxen twit with a great golden dog for a companion. She'd said it would be good to finally shake all the soot from her clothes. They'd glared and then grinned at each other.

It was an uneasy friendship and she was glad he was going away. She preferred the simple, natural bond of like-to-like she shared with Thor to the prickly truce between herself and he that should-not-be-as-he-is. Thor was what a prince ought to be. Trustworthy to his bones, unmatched in strength, never conniving, no deceptive magic: one always knew where one stood with him, he always took the straightest path to every end as a warrior should.

She only realised how long Loki had been gone when she passed him in a palace corridor on the day
of his return and did not know him. He called out after her and, his voice having fallen, she would not have known that either if he had not addressed her as 'both sooty and rude'.

For the first time in her life, she was forced to look up to meet his eyes. No longer a child but a willowy youth, he was so grown that he must be quite as tall as one of the King's Guard and stood nearly a head above her own height. How odd and how disconcerting to lift her chin to someone who had always been, and likely would always be, little in her mind. At least he did not loom over her as men sometimes did, he was too self-conscious in his stance to be intimidating, overly aware of his awkward length without proportional breadth. He did not present quite as large a figure as he truly was.

What baby fat there had ever been in his face, it was all but gone and his was a new leanness of feature, a painfully raw quality of expression. Studying him in her shock, she felt sure this would only become more pronounced with time and that the planes of his face would come together as sharp as flint when he grew into a man. He was far too fine-boned and slender to ever be handsome like his brother, but he was arresting. His unseemly raven's-wing hair was iridescent with shades of blue and purple in the beam of afternoon sunlight streaking in from outside. It framed him captivatingly, the soft black waves having grown long and being worn loose around his face, making luminous his pale complexion and bright his eyes, more blue than she remembered though still shot with silver-grey. Not clear and cloudless and radiant as Thor's were, but like a rime of frost on a bubbling spring: shining, still.

His unlovely parts took on a kind of eerie fascination as a whole.

"How cruel we are as children, how cruel and thoughtless." She groped for familiarity and found it lacking, falling back on a more formal tone as she struggled to see a boy she knew in his lanky elegance, "I was wrong to malign you so about your hair, Your Highness. I see now that it suits you."

Injured and bewildered at this rejection of what she'd half intended to be a blanket apology for whatever fault she bore in the tumultuous nature of their childhood friendship, she frowned ferociously at his back and wished he had not returned.

She wished it much more earnestly and with all her might when she rinsed out her hair that evening, pulling free the tiny gold sword pin which would hold it fast with no flying tendrils no matter what wind or heat or stress came to bear upon it, and it tumbled down her back no longer blonde but black as tar. Black as pitch. Almost as black as Loki's own.

Dark and terrible in her rust-red chemise and heavy, maroon dressing gown, she exploded into his chambers still dripping bathwater. She was out for blood and she tore through his receiving room into more private areas like a violent whirlwind, making certain that she knocked over or damaged as many of his things as she could in passing.

She was so furious that she could barely see. She cared nothing for the impropriety of her intrusion when she burst into his cabinet and found him even less suitably attired than she was, only too pleased that she could scratch at the exposed skin of his bare chest as she tackled him off of his bench.

"Squirrelly, ugly, frizzy-headed soot demon! I'd kill you if it weren't treason!" She smashed him in the face with her elbow on the way down, breaking his lip against his teeth. They crashed to the floor in a heap and she scrambled to get on top of him, pressing his arms to his sides with her knees.
He drew a leg up to where she sat on his upper chest, hooking his heel under her chin and dragging her backward so he could get his hands free. She scrawled ugly lines down his torso with her nails as she went, satisfied to hear him hiss in pain when she broke the skin. He snarled as he came after her, pinning her briefly until she got a leg between their bodies and leveraged them over again. He caught her fist when she reared to punch him and, to her tremendous shock, he was now stronger than she was and held off the intended blow without great difficulty.

"Turnabout is fair play, My Lady." He grinned unpleasantly at her, his teeth red with blood. "Cease this assault or I will see you in the stocks for striking a prince of Asgard."

Her rage was rendered impotent when she moved to attack with her other hand and he seized it too, so she pressed down against his restraining grasp with all her might. His block didn't give and her eyes welled with frustration as she struggled uselessly. "How dare you, how dare you!"

"You said you like it now," he purred at her. "You've learned to appreciate the dun. The filth of the less favoured."

"You wretch! I said it suited you. Change it back! I'm not a cheating, devious, sickly freak!"

His nostrils flared and he glared at her with burning indignation. "You told me you threw my present away, you told me that! If that had been true nothing would have happened. If you weren't so spiteful to tell me something awful that wasn't even-!"

"So I lied! I was a child and we were arguing! I've grown up, I know better now. How can you still be nursing your minuscule, insignificant wounds after all these years have passed? Everyone else must come into their maturity, but you are an infant to this day. Mewling in your crib for your trinkets!"

"You never wore it, not once. Before I did anything to vex you." His face was twisted up in hurt and anger and petulance, blood dribbling down his chin with every emphatic word, "I vexed you because you never wore it!"

Stony-faced to hide her discomfort and uncertainty, she stared into his eyes for a long moment before getting off him and walking a few steps away, pulling her robe more tightly about her as if it could shield her from his sudden honesty. It took only a few breaths to retrieve something that looked like calm. Sif had discipline. She heard him stand up behind her and hoped he'd cover himself quickly and try to regain a little dignity. "I suppose I must be sorry for that, but we were children and it was so long ago. Loki, please let us try to be friends for Thor's sake. Why does it matter? It was only a tiny thing."

She glanced at him over her shoulder and saw that he'd made no move to dress, looking ridiculous with his thrice-damned hair in a curly tangle and his gangly arms crossed over his skinny adolescent body. He was making a face like he'd tasted sour milk. "It was my best magic, all the girls before… I just wanted to…. Of course. For Thor's sake. I must remember where import lies."

She cleared her throat, blushing at the havoc she'd wreaked in his room and on his person now that the heat of anger had passed and she was feeling a returning awareness of the significance of their more advanced ages, the new roles they would soon be playing at court. Feeling distant and strange with him again as she fully accepted that he was emphatically not little, nor was he her playmate, any more. Even if she had still been able to overpower him like she used to, she'd said herself that they were not children any longer and should not act as though they were. "I am glad that you do."

He followed her eyes to the deep red grooves on his torso and sighed. "I won't let it be known, Sif. It would hardly be to my benefit if I did."
"Thank-you, Your Highness," she said stiffly, his title helping her to centre herself and push away the boy he had been. Still, she hesitated. "I knew you wouldn't. You have never betrayed me."

Loki shrugged, but his gaze was intent. "Loyalty is reciprocal."

Sif joined Thor as he stared down into the sprawling cosmos at the lip of the broken bridge. His great shoulders were slumped and the fierce light of joy and will that ever lit him with irresistible charisma was dimmed to a flicker by the weight of his sorrow.

"He was not wrong about everything."

She started, not having expected to hear him speak. "About what was he right?"

"He was right to feel slighted and belittled these many years, he was right that I was not prepared to be a king. I was blind to the harms I did in my arrogance, and from my impregnable rightness of place I could not fathom that he felt such terror of having none. My banishment has been a most timely education. What I cannot conscience, what delusion I cannot absolve him from, is that which I suppose must have been what he most could not bear. That he was not loved. "Thor turned to her, his handsome face drawn and haggard. "How could he imagine it was so?"

"He took terribly small things to heart, Thor, so long as they were awful. A thing you had, rightly, forgotten altogether he would be using to fuel a simmering stew of his resentment. It is not your fault."

"No," he said firmly, his hand falling heavily on her shoulder, "it is. It is not mine only, but it is mine. I am the eldest and I led by poor example down the very path he tread in his madness, though I may not have walked so far. I have many times I can only too swiftly recall lived down to the worst possible expectations my brother could have of me. For far too long, I lived thoughtlessly."

Sif grumbled in disagreement, finally muttering a repetition, "He took everything to heart."

"He did. But there were still many such things to readily take." Thor dashed a tear from his cheek with the back of his hand. "I mourn my brother, Sif, seeing him clearly for the first time. Had I looked sooner, I might have aided him. I might have rescued him from a prison of his own making. Perhaps he would not have allowed it and nothing would be altered, but my soul would be easier knowing I had ever tried. That I had ever seen trying was needed."

Any further objection was chased from her mind in the face of this insight. She stared at the shards of the Bifrost.

"Loki once offered to restore my hair if I would agree to wear a certain pin in it every day until your coronation. I refused, I said he was too petty to be indulged." She ran her hand through her long dark hair, silky strands slipping over her fingers like water, stardust glittering in its shiny length. "It was greater pettiness perhaps to resist such a trivial arrangement, but in truth I think I had grown grudgingly fond of this black soot."

She didn't realise she was weeping until Thor's arms embraced her and pressed her to his broad chest, his voice murmuring warm comfort in her ear.
Thor supposed it would have been asking a great deal to expect Loki to resist the opportunity. He had, after all, not seen his brother in so long that the edges of his memory had become polished with handling, his habitual sly smile slightly bright and lacking focus in Thor's mind. That would never have prevented him from knowing it at once, of course, but Loki had anticipated this.

His choice of greeting upon coming home from the Elves was to dress himself in the same yellow-gold armour Thor's swordmaster Aðalbrandr was seldom seen without and to lie in wait until he could catch Thor stealing from the armoury larder. Aðalbrandr alone could produce the singularly succulent honey apples that he shared with his pupils only one at a time and once in a great while as a reward for being the best and most attentive student in the ring.

Thor had received this honour very seldom indeed, and felt himself ill used enough that theft was justified. He was, as was his habit on the rare days when he knew the apples had been prepared, soon to be found creeping his way toward the cupboard where they were kept and lifting one silently to his lips.

"And what might you be doing, O great princeling Odinson? Wise enough to overturn the judgement of your elders and your teachers so soon? Perhaps I should inform your father the king that you think yourself ready to take his throne from him!"

Whirling toward the source of the shouting, Thor tried to swallow half an apple without choking and smile innocently at the same moment. His heavy brows lowered in confusion as he wondered how his teacher could have outflanked him. Surely he had left him on the other side of the exercise yard? A flawless mimic of old and now equipped with something nearer a man's range of vocal pitch rather than a boy's, Loki's tirade fooled Thor for the twenty seconds or so it took to spot the familiar armoured silhouette in the dim of the unlit room and to sense that something was slightly amiss with it. He had drawn breath to ask Aðalbrandr to show himself, his hand straying toward a staff leaning against the table behind him, when his confusion was resolved by Loki's insuppressible amusement.

No matter his disguise, Loki could never be anyone but himself when he laughed. He laughed from the tips of his toes to the ends of his hair, bending back like a bow and then falling forward to stamp and clutch his sides.

"Brother?" Thor was half convinced the apples had been drugged.

"Did not you miss me, not to know me, you great oaf!" Loki's eyes, no mistaking, sparkling like mountain water as he stepped into the sunlight.

Thor could not contain the smile, nor the roar of greeting, nor the bone-shattering embrace this sudden appearance provoked. Clasping Loki at the shoulders as he'd used to do to steady his slight frame during practise with the heavy wooden broadswords, he fully appreciated that his little brother
now stood almost his equal in height and the muscle beneath his hands felt haler and more hearty than it had ever portended to being in childhood. How wonderful it was! He'd begun to fear as a boy that Loki would forever be sickly, destined to the half-life of an invalid.

"So you come scampering back in disguise, finally so bored by all that magic and learning that you could do nothing but escape." He pounded Loki's shoulder in his enthusiasm. "I knew the day would come!"

Slightly staggered by the blows and giving Thor a look of fond exasperation, Loki threaded a guiding arm around his brother's back and turned their steps toward the palace gardens. "It would bode better for the good of Asgard if it were occasionally I who had escaped my schoolroom. Sadly, you have all that sort of adventure taken for yourself."

"And the lies begin," Thor crowed, "or have you forgotten that you became a genius of diversion and retreat but no statesman in old Egill's lectures on statecraft?"

"I deny everything except my genius."

Laughing in pleasure, Thor squeezed the shoulder where his hand still rested. "I missed you every day, brother."

"I have no doubt that you did," Loki said, "you must have found it dreadfully difficult doing your own sums and filching Mother's pastries without an accomplice."

"I employed the direct approach, as a warrior ought; I took them in a single glorious charge and was prepared to face my doom if caught."

Loki snorted. "And it works most excellently until the day one's doom isn't begging an indulgent parent for forgiveness. The art of subtlety is frightfully useful, I would have you know. One day, Thor, you will wish you had listened more to me."

"There is listening and there is heeding," Thor reminded, enjoying the well-trodden debate. His brother's novel notions had not yet ceased to amuse him. "A prince must take his own counsel."

"I, too, am a prince: I can bear the burden of forethought and choice-making for you and leave your first-born's time free to pursue more important matters. Like ill-gotten honey apples and being startled like a young gazelle."

Thor tried to elbow him and they swayed as Loki bent inward to protect his ribs, both chuckling.

"I shouldn't like to see you tax yourself overmuch with troubling thought," Loki said, all exaggerated concern. It was strange for Thor, hearing the impish tones and familiar cadences of Loki's conversation- the music of which he knew as dearly as his own cradle song- in a young man's voice rather than the childish soprano he so well remembered. He imagined Loki must feel the same oddness; although, with Thor being older and quicker-growing, the changes in himself since their parting were less pronounced.

"Have you no love for your elder brother at all?" Thor teased with mock tragedy. Change the superficial though time might, nothing important had been altered. Could be altered.

Loki's lips curled up coyly. "I have every love and no pity."

"How truly you speak. For once." Thor twinkled at his brother, needling him in the side.

"Close your great maw or I'll turn you into a frog."
"Bringing me down to your own natural state?"

Loki glared at him for that one, pulling the borrowed helm from his brow and shaking out his hair. He tossed the helmet behind him, knowing a gardener would discover it afore long. "I still fail to see how she thinks that epithet applies. I ought to have filled her bath with the creatures."

"I am shocked to learn you never did." Thor pulled away from their companionable walk to stretch his arms out and turn his face up to the bright sun of the afternoon. "I was certain I had only failed to hear of it because the threat of Sif's wrath ensured a dearth of gossip."

"The thought occurred," Loki admitted, looking somewhat wistful. "I could manage it easily now, my skill is so expanded by my studies that to conjure thousands of wriggling things even from the aether would be a mere trifle. You cannot imagine it, Thor!"

Even in his glee to see his brother, Thor's interest flagged upon the turn of the subject to magical study. "Indeed?"

Loki shot him a look, knowing him well. "You recall I was always best with knives and bow? Now I can conjure ammunition as quick as I can throw it. I need carry no belts of daggers and no quiver. I should not think it will be long until I need no bow."

"Truly?" Thor's excitement returned somewhat. Ranged combat was the least glorious engagement in battle, but he had been proud to see his brother best all others at any kind of weaponry. With this advantage, Loki would remain forever unsurpassed.

Loki smiled wryly. "Have I ever lied to you, brother?"

"A question I feel certain you do not wish me to answer."

A well-placed kick to the back of his knee nearly succeeded in tripping Thor, and he roared a battle cry as he leapt to tackle Loki to the ground in retaliation. Just as his arms were about to close around Loki's torso and pull him into the attack's momentum, his brother was abruptly no longer there. With nothing to grab but thin air, Thor fell so awkwardly that he was barely able to roll up into a crouch. Casting about him in utter shock, he caught sight of Loki standing a small distance off: laughing again.

"Brother! What in the Nine Realms-?" He jogged over and grabbed at Loki's flailing arm, trying to shake him out of his mirth. "Loki!"

Struggling to breathe, Loki couldn't seem to look at Thor without bursting into guffaws, so he turned away. "You should have seen your face, brother! You looked so outraged!" He hiccupsed and failed to swallow a fit of giggles.

His patience thinning as his astonishment gave way to irritated confusion, Thor just growled.

"It is a simple illusion, Thor," Loki finally managed, wiping his eyes and grinning unrepentantly, "I make myself not where I was when my presence was last confirmed by the subject and project an insubstantial image where I want my position presumed to be. It's essentially no more than a sleight of hand, a trick of the light."

Sifting the unnecessarily convoluted wording of that explanation, Thor shook his head. "You mustn't do that to me again, brother. I found it most unnerving."

Loki waved his hand dismissively. "It is nothing to unnerve you."
"Nevertheless, you must not practise it on me. Save it for Sif and the others," Thor commanded grumpily. He opted to magnanimously ignore Loki's poorly concealed delight in his discomfort.

"Unblessed as I am, Thor, would you not agree that I need every advantage my little gifts can give me?"

Suspecting some unsavoury undercurrent in that and loath to so soon reopen their frequently infuriating discussion about what were honourable tactics in battle, Thor just eyed Loki's guileless expression mildly. A small silence passed.

Suddenly, Loki laughed and slapped his back. "You are too serious, brother. Let us go and see what can be pilfered from the kitchen that is clearly meant for other mouths. It's been a giant's age since I had any amusement not at your expense."

Frowning to show more lingering disapproval of Loki's latest little joke than he could truly feel in such a moment of felicity as this reunion, Thor followed.

They climbed the winding stone steps which zigzagged across the terraces at the rear of the palace, the walkways carefully cut through the landscape to avoid spoiling the vistas of the smooth geometric patterns formed by the gardens and practise fields that filled the highest habitable cliffs in Asgard. The innermost courtyards were cobbled, and their boots rang pleasantly as they neared the stables. The familiar sound made Thor wonder what comforts other worlds lacked.

"Are Elves very strange to live with, brother?"

"Oh, very."

"Did you have no companions to make sport with, then?"

"Elves frown on sport."

Thor grinned. "Is that so?"

Loki grinned back, a devious light in his eyes. "So very much. I had to be quite cautious so as not to perturb them unduly."

"You are terribly conscientious of such things, brother."

"Of course I am," Loki said self-importantly, "everyone knows I am the last bastion of good breeding in this family."

"I shall remind Father of it so you may be rewarded for your example."

"So cruel you are to me."

"What wages a man earns, he cannot call unjust payment."

Loki slung an arm around Thor's neck, whispering conspiratorially. "Then you concede that you are owed every perturbation I can conceive of for you. For surely, you recall the slant of the tally when we parted ways? You joined forces with the Lady Disdain, do not think that I have forgotten it, and it was a most foul treason to your own blood."

"Brother, I fear not the worst rain of your vengeance upon me, so absolute is my confidence in your tiresome inclination to unwarranted temperance."

"Such valour."
Thor just grinned again, challengingly. It was so good to have his brother back.
It was a strange week.

Erik- back from a few days at SHIELD, probably at least half spent refusing to report on Jane's new lab hand- had not exactly thrown caution to the wind just yet. Between ominous predictions and cynical proclamations about how obvious the trap being laid was, however, he was waxing disturbingly near to giddy about Luke's undeniable brilliance. He was quite taken with the observer-quantum-uncertainty-something that Luke was still trying to adequately explain to them, but then Erik had always had the soul of a poet hidden under his lab coat.

Recalling his staunch disapproval at regular intervals, he'd tell Jane that no one so useful could possibly have just wandered in by chance and that Luke's lack of technical familiarity pointed to him being a spy given a crash course rather than an eccentric hobbyist. Erik was suspicious of coincidences in the best of times, which these were not. He was still upset about Norse mythology being somehow, tenuously, related to fact.

Jane was inclined to think that Luke's impatience, peculiar ignorances, and general air of a genius who doesn't quite realise that he is a genius were all far too genuine to be part of an act. If he were a spy, surely he would be easier to take and more believable. There would be some neatly constructed plausible lie to answer all their questions, not evasive vagueness and confused stares. Someone would have briefed him, someone would have taught him to act more like a regular dude. Anyone who could fake the glowing enthusiasm for the cosmos and the ecstasy in seeing her recognise and understand his ideas about it that he'd been exhibiting could certainly fake ordinariness.

She had a weird, baseless hunch that he could have convinced her he'd been born and raised in Puente Antiguo if he had wanted to.

Darcy, joining them through the magic of Skype and her hopelessly out-of-date webcam, was still firmly of the opinion that divine providence was at work. Which, contrariwise, made Erik's eyes roll heavenward as if to appeal directly to God for a refutation.

"He's no secret agent, you guys. Secret agents aren't awkward and mysterious, they train on purpose not to be. He sounds exactly like the typical brainy loner who does this stuff for fun just like he says he is," Darcy adjudged, looking up at the camera from painting her toenails. The original purpose of the call was Jane checking up on her not-really-protégé's credit situation, as there had been some concern on that front, but all was apparently well and the conversation had drifted back to Mr Mysterious. Darcy's new favourite topic.

Not sure if she was quite in the camera's line of sight, Jane shot her open laptop a cautious look as she chewed her lip. "How so?"

"Majorly gifted quiet types don't stand out academically, right, because the curriculum bores them but they don't make waves about it and nobody knows that's what's going down. Between being quiet and getting shit for nerdiness, they're not so into socialising, so they don't really have an idea of what normal is all about or where the smartness line actually is. They're out being mad bright and getting esoterically super-informed without realising how easily they become all niche and advanced class about stuff, and then they interact and don't get that regular people aren't slow, they're quick. They think everyone else is just being dense." She admired her hot pink toes and smiled in satisfaction. "You guys picking up what I'm putting down over there?"

Jane shook her head fondly at Darcy's characteristically uncanny ability to put her finger straight on
"Darcy pulled some kind of cheeky face, but the jumpy, crappy video made it hard to catch. "You have the soul of a brunette, boss. Anyway. How goes it? You think we'll be touring Asgarden next summer?"

"Asgard, and no, probably not." She sighed and rested her chin on her palm glumly. "I feel like we've made huge leaps in understanding, but the practical application seems miles out of reach. The kind of power you'd need to even think about trying to open a stable wormhole is stupid."

"Not to mention getting your hands on exotic matter." Erik mumbled, frowning at some equations on one of the half dozen computer screens that lit the lab.

"Double not to mention how to direct it. Luke said something about designing a device that can produce antimatter and being able to manipulate the properties of what it produces, but he has to be confused or trying to Punk me or something." Jane thought back over it and honestly couldn't make a decision. She wouldn't have thought he was the type to pull her leg, but then he'd practically dared her to acknowledge the glove and start a prank war whenever she felt like it because he'd be ready for her.

Returning, as promised, the morning after Jane's faux pas, Luke wore his familiar black suit in a way that managed to project an increase in formality without undergoing any tangible change in tailoring. His hair was so firmly glued to his head that it looked painted on and slightly slick with whatever he'd combed into it to convince it not to fall naturally. Already severe as a marble effigy, his profile seemed even sharper and his forehead even higher. If he was trying to look like the angel of death, he was well on his way.

Jane couldn't contain her exasperated smile when she opened the door to him and took in his rigid stance, his shoulders so painfully upright that he looked like he was wearing body armour. In spite of his tremendous effort towards grimness, his prim expression (with slight pretensions to martyrdom) was a bit too adorably obvious for her to despair of stopping this sulk before it really got started. "Don't you own jeans? I swear I remember telling you about the dress code."

A tiny wrinkle formed between his eyebrows and he glanced down at himself, then at her slightly threadbare blue jeans (not intentionally distressed, they dated back to her freshman year and came by their worn knees honestly), smiley-face sun t-shirt (not worn ironically), and the frumpy cardigan she always threw on top in order to pretend she had a deliberate casual-academic look. Or to curl up in, if necessary. It was like a portable couch, down to the odd bits found in the cracks.

He said nothing until their eyes met again, "Your 'dress code'... is 'jeans'?"

She wondered if he understood which item of clothing the word referred to, or if he'd even got that far. It was hard to tell with him, he might just be dripping delicate scorn on her sartorial choices. Did people wear jeans in Africa? They sure did in Oxford when they could get away with it. She just nodded. "Yes. Jeans are the dress code. From now on, buddy."

He blinked to himself a moment and then made to go past her, waiting until she sensed his intention
and stepped aside to give him space. "I shall correct my attire before our next meeting. I do prefer to
stand on ceremony, Jane, though I'm... Oh." Catching sight of Erik leaning over a computer nestled
among the tech detritus on her worktable, he stopped dead. "I did not realise..."

Jane hurried over to rescue him from the wave of politeness which seemed to have swamped him

"Dr. Erik Selvig, yes?" Luke asked, leaning toward Erik to shake hands. He managed it with the
natural ease which he had painfully lacked when he met Jane. Was shaking hands all the time an
American thing that he hadn't got used to yet? she wondered. Or maybe she just intimidated him.
That was likely.

"You know my work?" Erik threw an amazingly unsubtle This is Suspicious look her way.

Luke smiled with utterly disarming charm, touching a finger to the side of his nose like he was
sharing a secret. "I have perused your submissions to publicly available journals most avidly, Doctor,
since I discovered your connection to Jane."

"That interested, were you?"

Luke's smile turned boyish, his tone conspiratorial, "Am I to be faulted? Is not Miss Foster standing
alone in her field?"

Erik's eyebrows rose.

"Annnnyway." Jane put herself between them, fiddling with the notepad she'd been carrying.

"Luke's got a new angle I'd love to get your thoughts on if you're interested in, you know, something
besides embarrassing me."

They'd spent the entire ensuing week sitting around in the living room-ish quadrant of the lab yelling
at each other about physics and outlandish, sci-fi-esque theories of wormhole travel. Luke,
disadvantaged by his limited understanding of jargon and almost total unfamiliarity with notation,
was reduced to asking for frequent explanations, sometimes through gritted teeth. It wasn't that he
seemed to mind needing to learn or asking questions: he'd been doing that happily enough with Jane
and only became impatient when she continued to explain after he felt he'd got the jist, but he
obviously hated to fall behind the conversation. When they argued over his head, she finally noticed
on the third day, he got this look on his face of what she could only describe as seething resignation.
Like a star player sitting on the bench but determined to wait for the coach's call. Like he was used to
it, expected it, and bitterly resented it at all once.

She was becoming desperate in her curiosity to know what his real life was. What had made him into
the odd person that confronted her, what his education had been like. So she ended their Friday
evening bickering at a semi-sensible mealtime and announced they were going to the bar for dinner.

If liquor couldn't loosen his lips, she'd send out for some sodium pentothal.

It was, luckily enough, the first day he'd managed to bring himself to obey her edict to dress more
like a normal person and less like he'd just walked off a runway somewhere. It would cause enough
comment just parading someone so inherently noticeable in front of the bored locals, he didn't need
to flagrantly not belong in their scruffy company. Even in black denim, black t-shirt, and a charcoal
blazer, he cut such an august figure that she worried people would gossip he was incognito European
royalty or something. Not that she ever caught herself theorising in that direction.

As they walked to the bar she repeatedly only just stopped herself from grabbing his hands to still
them as he gesticulated uncontrollably when he was really into what he was saying, and she tried to interrupt as gently as possible when interruption was necessary:

"Luke, Luke, you're almost explaining Special Relativity. We've got a pretty good handle on that. Just finish what you were saying about calculating destinations with those principles in mind, I promise I can steer you right if you start going wrong there."

"That's just a vacuum chamber. I could set one up in the lab, it wouldn't be that hard."

"It'd be anacoustic, though, so you couldn't."

He always turned to look at her with a burningly intent, searching expression, his eyebrows slightly drawn up in the middle and making his focus seem tinged with sadness somehow. He didn't come across as terribly aware of what bleeding edge technology wasn't capable of for someone who read scientific journals, seeming mildly inconvenienced and personally disappointed when she called out his suggestions as functionally, rather than fundamentally, impossible.

Then he got this thoughtful look that she found a little bit disconcerting.

It was like he was dead certain she was wrong and both smug and miffed about it.

..................

He made a dismayed, disgusted, confused face at the menu she couldn't even begin to work out, so she took it away from him and ordered an enormous amount of beer and a bunch of finger food. She was going to find out at some point what the hell he'd been eating and where he'd been staying, because she had to know. He clearly hadn't been coming in here: the wait staff took turns 'checking' on them and then huddling in the corner to whisper to each other. Probably spreading it around that Jane had finally revealed her reason for turning down every date she'd been offered since her arrival in New Mexico. It would be everywhere in the morning that her exotic, male model, secret agent, foreign dignitary boyfriend had come to visit.

At least the small town assuming Luke had to be with her with her because he'd come through the door in her vicinity meant she didn't have to watch half the bar try to hit on him. Entertaining as that might have been.

Erik wasn't too keen on her beer selection and called for another pitcher of something else. Which was probably where trouble began, because it made ordering two of the same seem like a good idea when the first ones were gone.

Luke had tasted the beer and looked slightly surprised before going back for a bigger sip, so Jane figured her plan to get him drunk enough to loosen up was well on its way. The fact that the plan became increasingly fuzzy as the evening wore on reminded her that she was much, much smaller than either of the men and would likely be off her face before they could get past buzzed. Slowing her consumption to a crawl allowed her to observe her mentor getting happier with every pint and Luke being utterly unchanged. And that the room was still tilting a bit more than usual.

He could not possibly have so much more alcohol-mitigating muscle mass than Erik did, he was too thin. Yet, beer disappeared from his glass just as quickly and he remained incongruously, annoyingly sober.

"Luke, be real with me, because it's seriously killing me." She leaned her elbow on the table to support her cheek, ignoring the wounded glare she was getting from Erik for interrupting his anecdote mid-sentence. "I'm a scientist and my curiosity is the curiosity of ten regular men."
"I have noted that about you, strangely enough."

She frowned at him, at his mild tone, wondering if he was aware that sarcasm was anger's ugly cousin. "Well, answer me then!"

"I would, Jane," Luke allowed in the same patient voice, "if you had asked me a question."

Jane stared at the empty and half-empty pitchers on the table and tried to recall the conversation. She watched Erik's fingers clumsily playing with a wayward curly fry and couldn't even remember what she had been thinking about. "I asked it in my head."

"Alas, I am not privy to what dwells there unless it makes its way out."

"You really think you can make a matter-antimatter annihilation engine of a not only humanly possible, but easily workable size?" Erik suddenly asked, snapping back to much earlier in the evening. He swayed slightly, his words stumbling over each other. "What do you know that all of the scientific community doesn't know?"


Erik frowned at Jane and she shrugged. In her cups and at this precipice of weirdness, she was prepared to believe it.

"And you have a desktop-sized particle accelerator that somehow doesn't need outside power. That's what you're telling me."

Luke sipped and Jane watched him lick his lips a little more shamelessly than she would have if her bloodstream weren't so flooded by judgement impairing chemicals. He didn't seem to notice.

"Perhaps."

Erik staggered to his feet. "This is worse than the other guy."

"And look how that turned out." Jane muttered, more optimistic than it made any sense to be. Maybe it was just the beer, but right now she thought Luke could do all the things he was intimating that he could. His knowledge was so weird. So empirical. Maybe he'd experienced the natural world somehow differently and his insight was genuine. Stranger things had happened; to her, even. She blinked as Erik turned away. "Where are you going?"

"Home to bed. I think I'm dreaming again."

They stared at him as he made his slow way to the door, then they looked at each other.

"I will escort you back to your laboratory," Luke announced with a certain gentlemanly propriety that registered his disapproval of Erik leaving her to her own devices in a vulnerable state. She was about to object to the possible implications of this sentiment when he stood up- with all of his accustomed grace and not even the smallest sign of intoxication- and she pitched forward trying to follow him. He caught her by the shoulder and held her up unobtrusively with just the tips of his fingers. "I must insist you take my arm, under the circumstances."

Giggling to herself over his ridiculous manners, she slid to the edge of the booth and curled her hand under and around his raised forearm, using him as a crutch to lever herself up and semi-accidentally flinging herself off the raised platform they'd been seated on. He didn't give a millimetre for a single instant under the sudden pressure of her entire body weight swinging on the extremity of his fully extended arm, the muscles had not even braced involuntarily against the unexpected load. "Do you work out?" she blurted as she got her feet under her again. He was so strong.
"Out of doors?" he asked, puzzled, steadying her again with his free hand as he began to lead her towards the exit. He had to bend down so she could lean on his arm, and vastly shorten his long stride to accommodate her drunken gait.

She tried to muffle her laughter in her sleeve and snorted. "No. Never mind."

The cool night air woke her up a bit and she touched her flushed cheeks self-consciously. "Luke, really, what are you doing here? I keep asking and you keep deflecting."

"I have answered you at least twice, Jane." He spoke slowly, as if she were very stupid.

"Okay, so you're super fascinated by my research and I grant you that no one is doing what I'm doing. I guess that makes sense, but Luke, you are terrifyingly brilliant, you've got money. If you're so interested and have so many ideas, I don't get what you need me for." There was a part of her that was feeling almost as afraid as she was excited by the possibilities she recognised in his thoughts, part of her that had enough room left after the professional awe and pride to be insecure. This was her life's work and he was grasping it all so quickly, there was an academic misfit at the back of her brain racked with fear of losing her extremely hard-earned place to someone who was just naturally, effortlessly better.

When he answered, he sounded far away, "You said it yourself, Jane. You are a scientist. I am an amateur."

"Right." She clutched his arm a little harder as they descended a curb to cross the street. "So why do you say you have nothing else to do in the whole world? That can't be true."

"Can't it?"

She shot him a look, trying to glare so many daggers at his aristocratic profile that he'd actually feel the sting. "Apart from the obvious, there's also the fact that you're rich and interesting and charismatic, you could probably make your 'not obscene' fortune truly offensive in any career you felt like trying."

"Likely I could," he conceded, "But what would be the point? Did I ever lead you to believe that money and notoriety are the things I desire to gain from this enterprise? What is 'the obvious'?"

"I mean, the obvious fact that you can't hurt for company."

He slowed their already glacial progress. "How is that?"

Sensing something dangerous lurking around this conversation, Jane swallowed her instinctive sharp retort and tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was just confused. "Like, I doubt Johnny Depp goes home alone unless he wants to."

"Who?"

"He's an actor."

"Oh, yes," he said in a manner that suggested he'd heard of him after all. Jane doubted it.

She was sure he was missing the plot still anyway. "Really, really good-looking."

He stared ahead blankly, apparently not seeing the relevance of this information. "Ah, indeed. Not having any prize-worthy features, I try to save myself the energy consumed in envy by avoiding notice of such things."
Jane nearly choked. He turned to her with a look of equal parts such profound reproach that she wanted to bake him an apology cake and a warning of terrible anger should she persist in this course.

"Oh," she murmured in total shock, "you're serious?"

He'd stopped altogether, his head tilted as he looked at her uneasily, his lips pressed together with an air of palpable defensiveness. She noticed his hair coming unstuck again, falling slightly away from his scalp above his ears but still in its shellacked lines where the comb had pulled through. The hand not supporting her was shoved into his pocket and his posture was as staunchly upright as ever, though he seemed to be leaning away from her.

"Are you going to stand there and tell me you're not aware of what you look like?"

It was almost like she'd slapped him. He opened his mouth to make what was obviously going to be the most hurtful comment he could think of probably followed by some tirade about what he thought he looked like, but she headed him off at the pass, finally convinced he was operating under some very serious delusions.

"You are incredibly handsome, I cannot believe you don't know that. Did you not see those girls at the bar with their tongues hanging out? Didn't Darcy harass you? She must have. She has no filter between her brain and her mouth and she told me what she thought of you. Like, whatever your issues, you can't tell me you went to University and everything and didn't find out that you were hot."

He was turning an interesting colour and he was fidgeting frantically with his jacket, his voice strangled as he answered, "I assure you I did not. At home... it was very clear that I was not... No one there would have considered me attractive. I fit absolutely none of the standards, and I was very much aware of it. I find it difficult to believe standards could be so different elsewhere."

Jane felt like this might be the weirdest encounter she'd had with him yet. It couldn't be countenanced. It just could not. The evidence was overwhelmingly against it. Even right then, uncomfortable and discombobulated to the point that he looked as though he'd like to die on the spot, he was so preposterously lovely that she honestly could not imagine a world in which he was not Considered Attractive. She wanted to kiss along the lengths of his beautiful fingers and run her hands over the wide breadth of his shoulders and down the long muscles of his back to his slim waist. She wanted to scratch her nails gently through his hair until it fell soft and curly, the way it obviously wanted to be. Hell, she wanted to kiss that strange, haunted look off his heartbreakingly pretty face and nuzzle his perfect cheekbones.

Yep, she was drunk. Point being, there was no way this man could be called ugly. He could not be this insecure.

Patting his arm, she tried to smile reassuringly. "Honey, things are that different. Believe me. Now help me get home before you have to carry me."

He was saying something in response, but she didn't really hear; the last couple beers were metabolising and she was still getting more sloshed. They were at her trailer before she'd really regathered her brain cells. She got the door open, but she stared at the steep steps and large gap between trailer and ground with mournful certainty that she wouldn't make it. Luke made a wordless 'permission to touch?' motion and, at her nod, held her gently by the elbows and lifted her over the stairs entirely, waiting for her to get a grip on something before he let go.

He bowed to her slightly and shut the door before she could think of anything to say.
There would be a lot of thoughts to be had about this in the morning, she was sure. Right now, however, there was only sleep.
It wasn't so much the hangover- which could have been a lot worse: she recalled a celebration dinner back at Culver Uni that had involved such an extremity of vodka that blinking had become a Herculean labour alike to being an arthritic contortionist, this was a mild ache and a slightly upset stomach, this she could handle- as the total agony of embarrassment, that had her pinned under the bedclothes in a state of humiliated lethargy.

Talk about a clever idea. She was supposed to be smart. She should have thought through the contingencies, realised she had no idea of Luke's alcohol tolerance, realised she could end up making a complete idiot of herself in public, realised she could say something super majorly inappropriate. Which she kind of had. Sort of. She wasn't sure how inappropriate her many blunt pronouncements really were; she hadn't been getting out a lot lately. But anyway, as usual, the burning need for answers had overridden the common sense which told her she was acting like a teenage busybody.

She didn't even have anything to show for it, Luke's purpose and motivations were as elusive as ever. The only thing she had learned about him was that he maybe, apparently had no idea that he was gorgeous. Jane still found this extremely difficult to accept.

She was still staring at the ceiling in abject regret when the soft knock came. It made her sit straight up and stare around the fridge at what she could see of the door. Erik would never be up yet, Darcy was miles away, and the odd time strangers came around they always went over to the lab. It being an actual building.

Which meant Luke was trying to ruin her life on purpose. What had she done to deserve that? Did he still think she'd been making fun of him? Could he really be that tragically misguided?

Jane finger-combed her hair into a slightly less horrific tangle and smoothed her oversize t-shirt and flannel comfy pants. She was not in a fit state to face the possible repercussions of her rampant idiocy the night before at all. Damnit. It wasn't like she usually dressed up to a standard significantly higher than what she had on, but she would prefer to assemble some dignity and at least not be wearing something she'd slept in. Well, Mr. Fashion out there would just have to cope. Not that he really seemed cognisant of fashion, per se; it was more that he was seemingly unaware that there were clothing options other than bespoke tailored finery. His suits were sharp enough to cut, but he had no obvious understanding of the limitations of their appropriateness. Focus, Jane. Rein in your brain, Jane. This, this right here, is how you get yourself into Situations.

Luke had somehow discovered sunglasses. In his new jeans and a button down layered over a t-shirt, he looked a bit like any given grad student. Almost normal. Then he tried to smile in greeting, the corner of his mouth twitching uncertainly upward but not quite making it, and met her eyes over the rim of the glasses with a strangely searching look. The possibility of normality was dispelled. Him being from Africa was really not fully covering his atmosphere of singularity for her at this point.

"I've brought..." he began, holding up a bag, at the same time that she said, "I'm sorry."

He pursed his lips, sucking his cheeks against his teeth and studying her with a kind of edgy reluctance before finally asking, "For what are you sorry, Jane?"

Folding the hem of her t-shirt between her fingers, she hid behind a curtain of her hair and tried not to blush. "For, you know, anything I might have said or done last night that was too much. I don't remember offending you horribly, but I was a bit less observant than usual, so you know."
“You did spend some time praising my appearance,” he said in a tone of forced lightness, as if he were trying to find that funny because somehow he thought that he should.

“Oh God.” How could he be so... so. She nervously scratched her forehead, checking out his expression surreptitiously and finding it a crude facsimile of dismissive ease. She lost herself momentarily in the breathtakingly awkward realisation that he was not just nice to look at sort of abstractly as he had been before, like a painting one would hang on the wall, but that at some point over the last three weeks, she’d become actually attracted to him and overindulgence had floated this unwanted knowledge to the surface of her brain. This made it worse that she clearly had to say something if she wanted to not be the jerk here.

“You were intoxicated,” Luke was excusing distantly, misinterpreting her embarrassment, "I quite understand."

“You do, huh?” This was like peeling off a band aid. "What you do you understand?"

Struck speechless, he stared at her like she’d said something rude.

‘Winning gold in the awkward conversation Olympics again this year, Jane. Someone had to put this maniac right and it might as well be her. She couldn't bear to be pussyfooting around this much psychological chaos when there were space-time anomalies to study. "That wasn't the beer talking, you know- well, it was in the sense that I probably wouldn't have been quite that, um, direct, but not in the, um, not... I mean, I meant it. It's true. And I kind of think you don't understand that."

One hundred percent of his intimidatingly astute concentration was on her, those cool blue eyes searching her face with disquieting seriousness. He was definitely trying to catch her at something. "I see," he said at last. He totally didn't, but she was so done talking about this.

“What's in the bag?” she asked, bubbly with relief that she had done her duty as a decent person and tried to get through to him- not once but twice- and that they were still talking amicably in spite of his strange, unpredictable reactions to her efforts to be nice to him. She knew one thing about him for sure, she supposed: he could not take a compliment.

He looked at it, then glanced warily back at her before he decided to let it all go. "Some components, requiring only assembly and a few added touches. If I might have access to your supplies and the tools in the lab- and your superior experience in 'kludging', as you say- I believe I can begin to deliver on some of what I've promised."

Jane blinked in shock. "You've got the components of a particle accelerator in that bag?"

"I believe so.” He seemed a trifle smug, amused and gratified by her more-than-half-disbelieving, helpless awe.

"If not the money and fame, what do you want out of this project?” Clearly, if he wasn't totally bonkers, it was true that he did not need her help or her research to acquire money and fame. Which did rather put to bed the scientific espionage theory, though she could no longer make herself consider him being a SHIELD plant even as a mental safety net to keep her on her toes.

He sighed, probably having thought they were finished rehashing last night's conversation. "Jane, I can't tell you that, and it is not because I am attempting to spy on you. No one has hired me and you have nothing I wish to steal. I will enthrall you, one last time, with the perfectly unvarnished truth and I will implore you to at length believe it as you have refused to do up until now: the honest answer is that I must do something, and this is the only thing that there is on this planet which can possibly
She narrowed her eyes at him, feeling a mixture of guilt and suspicion and knowing it was all over her face.

"I jest not." He sliced the air between them with his hand. "I want to help you, Jane, I don't know what- if anything- I expect from the end result, but I do want to help you for its own sake. For your own sake. There is no ulterior motive except to enjoy the pursuit and like-minded company."

"Why do you want to?"

"You deserve to succeed. You're closer than anyone else. I have no reason to do it alone." His robotic shrug told her- as he carefully hadn't admitted with words- that he believed he was absolutely capable of doing it alone and, at the rate he was going, she found it increasingly difficult to doubt him. Even sober, she was starting to think he might actually be able to bend the parameters of the impossible. He always had this air like he was waiting to see if she would give up and ask him to solve everything with a snap of his fingers. Like that was an option.

I have no reason to do it alone, she thought. Translation: I could do it alone but what would be the point? Leaving aside whether he could or not for a second, she didn't like the picture he was painting. "Is your foster mother still living?"

He recoiled from the blunt question with a shocked intake of breath that was almost a hiss and sneered nastily at her. "Does your foster father frequently fall drunk and leave you to walk to the edge of the desert alone at night?"

Well, she had wondered what the breaking point would be between his prickliness and her diarrhoea of the mouth. "All right, I think you're pretty clearly super lonely and I've been taking advantage of that to satisfy my curiosity: that's probably wrong, but I'm well into adulthood and Erik doesn't need to hold my hand every second so I'll thank you not to go around casting judgement."

"It's not a question of adulthood, it's a question of vulnerability to attack and suitability of companion, but obviously you were perfectly capable and in no need of assistance last night. Why, I hardly had to carry you home, surely no harm would have befallen you. Surely had I been any of those things he so fears I may be, I would have been in no position to take advantage of your suggestive state." His icy sarcasm and the way he used the contrasting velvety smoothness of his voice like a subtle blade flayed her of defences and hit unerringly home. "I'll thank you not to speculate on my emotions or you will find my previous generosity towards your impertinence for the sake of our work runs out extremely quickly."

At an impasse in the wake of his cutting but infuriatingly accurate tirade, they stood in tense silence. Jane felt like a tumble weed should roll through any time now. She didn't want to apologise again because she didn't really feel like she'd done anything wrong, and she was losing patience for the lingering rigid formality of his conversation, but she knew they'd both die here if she waited for him to make the first move toward reconciliation. She saved her immovable stubbornness for science and other battles worth winning. It was better, in relationships, to be the peacemaker.

"You can turn my personal questions back on me, you know. You don't have to be constantly drowning in politeness and always accommodating until you can't take it any more."

Luke scoffed in disbelief. "What makes you imagine I could possibly be interested in the insignificant details of your life as you are so relentlessly, inexplicably interested in mine?"

She wanted to laugh at his obvious dissembling, but contained herself to a wry grin. "You're just as
curious as I am, Luke, not least about a kindred spirit. Don't pretend like you're not. I've met you."

For a second, several reactions warred on his face and there was some anger in there that she worried could be explosive. Finally, he looked surprised and almost pleased. "Indeed, perhaps you are right."

"Usually am." Jane congratulated herself on her ability to deflate his posturing so easily. He always seemed to expect her to fly into a rage and present a great big target for him, but she'd spent far too much time learning to be all right with herself to rise to such transparent bait.

"And you would consider us to be of a kindred spirit?"

"It seems like a good way of putting it. You've got to be the only person I've ever met who thinks quantum entanglement could be better explicated in verse than in math. I don't really get what you mean in that case, but I saw your eyes getting all shiny and I know exactly what you were feeling. I haven't had many friends who really got it, not even in the field. This is my life, I couldn't love it more, pretty much nothing is more important- I don't know if you're in that place about astrophysics in particular, but I think you definitely are about gaining new understandings of the universe."

He smiled at her and it had a kind of warmth to it she had never seen from him before, cautious and nearly shy. "Would you ever consider me a friend, Jane?"

She smiled back, feeling touched by the tentativeness of his tone in spite of everything. "Sure."

"But not now, because you don't trust me, do you?"

"I think there's a lot you're not telling me. Some of it maybe stuff I actually should know, not just stuff I'd like to know." Hesitating, she felt compelled to be honest even if it was foolhardy. "But I do trust your intellectual integrity, I trust your curiosity. I believe that no one sent you here."

Luke nodded, thoughtful. "Shall we proceed to the laboratory?"

She coloured slightly. "Um, I'll just... if you could give me a second, I'll get dressed."

"Oh." He looked appalled. "Are you not...? Yes, I will wait over... Excuse me."

She finally heard her cellphone vibrating while she was buttoning up the plaid shirt with the two holes in it she had promised herself she would stop wearing. It turned out Erik had called three times already, having woken and suddenly remembered that he'd abandoned her at the bar, off her face and with the disturbingly sober nefarious element.

Jane rolled her eyes at his mothering and threw the phone on the bed. Thinking about how low her supply of various electronic and other bits of junk was getting, she reconsidered and gathered phone, wallet, keys, and her notebook into a big shoulder bag. An adventure was in order and now she had someone besides Darcy (who usually made it worth it to struggle by herself) to carry crap.

The thing Luke had in his bag was in several pieces, none of which were recognisable as part of anything she had ever seen. Smooth and angular, the components appeared to be some kind of bronze-coloured metal with smaller inner workings in shades of gold and Luke's weird handwriting scratched all over it in labels that she didn't understand. He explained that the material allowed the scale, but he couldn't tell her how in a way that she could follow. There were properties, he said, that allowed a small layer she could see inside of the cylinder to act the same way as fleets of superconducting magnets. It was sounding more like poetry than physics again and listening to him try to make it sound plausible while withholding her own judgement was just giving her a headache.
She, in turn, tried to explain why size was always such a problem using the example of the Large Hadron Collider, but succeeded only in making that crease of annoyance appear between his eyebrows.

Her breathless, nauseated hope-terror-burning desire for his device to be real, for him not be crazy, for it all to work- and his frustration with their mutual incomprehension- made it impossible to stay calm and collected. Jane decided they would go to her favourite junk dealer, get distracted enough to breathe for a bit, and play with their toys after. There were other materials they would need before he could put the thing together, anyway, and they might as well be ready to see the madness through to the end. She told him they were going and didn't wait for any argument, heading out of the lab into the driveway. Luke eyed her van with tremendous distrust and she had a passing fancy that he could sense what had happened to her last stray involving it before she told him, amused, that they could walk if he preferred.

She enjoyed walking through Puente Antiguo, anyway. The town's atmosphere was an odd one for New Mexico and it certainly didn't look typical to the rest of the State, but the elaborate faux-quaintness was sort of endearing. Someday she would have to ask a local to explain how the broad, pastel façades and nostalgic store fronts had become the dominant aesthetic of an entire high street; she suspected an ambitious council meeting and the words 'tourist industry' were probably involved.

Luke walked quietly beside her, looking mildly predatory even at a stroll. Unsmiling, eyes forward, and always moving with palpable purpose in his every step, he managed to seem both extremely out of place and to convey an air that he was blessing the dirtbowl with his presence without even doing anything. Truly, he was giftedly remarkable. Even if he hadn't been, there weren't a lot of tall, dark strangers in Puente Antiguo and Jane herself was only just becoming commonplace enough to escape being viewed as entertainment. Passers-by were sneaking glances at him, did flamboyantly obvious double takes, or straight up stared. Mostly the women were the ones staring, but not all of them appreciatively.

He gave no sign that he noticed the curious and suspicious scrutiny of the townspeople, but Jane was somehow certain that he did. She found herself, now, painfully conscious that his discomforts were in no small part due to an all-encompassing insecurity with every aspect of himself, not arrogance alone or his more simple awkwardness. He was a fish out of water in more ways than just being a stranger in a strange land.

They passed Annie's Diner and its perpetual plywood front, not quite covering the devastation underneath, and Luke stared at it a moment too long, his eyes slightly rounder than usual.

"We had, uh, a tornado," she offered, following his gaze. Technically, that was true. Thor had caused one somehow with his super-hammer. That wasn't what had created this particular damage- she thought it might have been the third time the big scary robot thing had thrown the beardy guy off its back and he went careening through the store fronts- but it wasn't actually a lie.

"The others have been repaired," Luke observed in a near-whisper.

"The owners didn't have insurance, there was only so much time and money around to help out with all the damage, you know. There's a couple places still digging themselves out of the hole."

"I see."

He strode on and she had to jog slightly to catch up. "Not how they do it round your place?"

"The village is the village. It would be the responsibility of everyone, not least the king, to... heal a disaster."
His tone closed the subject and she wondered why he'd gone so white. Maybe a natural disaster had killed his birth mother, the father he had yet to mention. Maybe it was something else entirely. She felt like she was falling into a black hole with this man, either she was about to be spaghettified or she was going to discover the next plane of existence. Either he was crazy or they were about to change the world.

She should probably be afraid, but she wasn't.
The junk shop was most of an old, two-storey hardware store and the fenced in lot behind, both stuffed to the gills with all kinds of random crap. There was everything from nineteen-fifties era appliances to auto parts to a working soundboard. Jane once found an old Macintosh II in there and had barely stopped herself from lugging the thing home just for the fun of taking it apart, of trying to make it work again. Organised, approximately, by wherever there was room when it was brought in, the stock teetered almost to the ceiling in vast, filthy columns. Pretty much anything could eventually be found there if one was willing to look hard enough.

The more practically useful, modern stuff was kept in a locked side room, significantly less dusty and better lit than the rest of the dingy old place, and was replenished mostly by the cast-offs of an aerospace research team who operated not far outside of town. Jane had her suspicions that the program director was throwing her a bone where he could, because they’d let go some very workable computers and seismic equipment which she’d easily been able to refit for her purposes.

She grabbed Luke's hand to pull him toward the door and tried not to be offended by his violent flinch as her grasp closed around his fingers. Apparently she’d just surprised him, as he allowed her to lead him inside and didn't shake off her grip even as they crossed the antique threshold. It was probably happy for all concerned that the peeling paint rubbed off on Jane's sleeve and not his when she held the door open for him.

He must have been surprised anew when a mound behind the counter that gave every indication of being a heap of old clothes with a baseball cap and newspaper on top shifted and grunted at them as they came in. A wizened face appeared from behind the paper. "If it isn't my best customer, Dr. Foster. I was beginning to think you'd skipped town on me without saying goodbye. You find out about that freak storm yet? Maria thinks it's an omen, she always does."

Jane smiled fondly as she watched the owner get up, dust off his overalls, and smooth his work-stained hands over his prodigious belly. "Afraid not, Lucio. I'll let you know. This is Luke."


Lucio eyed him and grunted again, neutrally. "Looking for anything in particular, Jane?"

She chattered a bit about hoping to cannibalize a few more of the old aerospace sensor set-ups and hoped Luke would realise that they had never established what he actually needed and step in to offer some additional direction. He carefully followed them into the locked side room, struggling to maintain his personal bubble of cleanliness in the cramped and dirty surroundings. When she glanced back and caught his expression of discreet distaste at his surroundings, it made her want to laugh out loud. He could be such a little princess.

"You said, Jane," he finally interrupted, his eyes carefully surveying the racks and piles, "that we might build a small vacuum chamber in the laboratory?"

"Yeah, yeah!" She pointed at him enthusiastically, glad he had brought it up because she'd completely forgotten. "Lucio, you have something for me in the way of a robust, air-tight tank? About yea big?"

She felt almost giddy with excitement to be building something, readying a practical experiment. There hadn’t been any for quite some time, what with her portal-research at a stand still and her data crunching starting over fresh with the insights she'd gathered from Thor. She wasn’t certain where
they would go from here, but there was no point getting ahead of something that her rational brain was telling her wasn't terribly likely to happen in the first place.

"Got an old pressure washer, could work. She's junk, but with a will and some elbow grease, I figure she still got some fight in her. You got flanges and pumps? I have whole rooms of that kind of thing, practically free. You need tubing and pressure readers: I got that, too." He waved them out of the way and pottered into the next room, the sound of shifting rust and clanking parts drifting after him.

"He's quite a salesman, isn't he?" Luke remarked conversationally.

Jane ignored him and followed Lucio's beckoning shouts.

They really should have brought the van.

She refused to feel sorry for Luke and his nice clean clothes and his perfectly put-together, tightly wound, touch-me-not-ness, because it was really his own fault that he had to carry a bunch of filthy, heavy metal. Uncomplaining, though looking offhandedly aggrieved in her direction when he thought she wasn't watching, he bound the big pieces of steel in a complex polyurethane sling that he lifted, one-handed, like he was picking up an enormous snotty hanky. He wrinkled his nose at it and slung it reluctantly over his shoulder. The thick tubing and huge copper flanges he had stashed in a canvas bag that dangled from his other hand. She chose not to wonder how much all that stuff had to weigh, because he let show no sign of exertion and she had no problem leaving him to his martyrdom.

Her shoulder bag she filled with bits of old motherboard, some sensors, solder, a giant tangle of various wires, and useful switches. Its straps dug into the flesh of her arm as she hefted it, and she sighed at herself for ever thinking of coming here without the van no matter how much its existence seemed to offend her new partner in crime.

"I would've gone back for the car," she said again. They walked along at the same brisk pace as before, but his burden barely shifted with the motion of his stride. He'd wrapped it with precisely perfect balance.

"So you said, and I informed you then that it was not necessary." He managed to sound exactly as prim as ever. "I assume that you heard me? That perhaps you might even heed me this time?"

Jane grinned to herself as she shifted her bag to the other shoulder. "Oh, absolutely."

"Excellent."

She thought of saying something about pride going before the fall, but decided not to tempt fate. If he tripped because of all that crap he was pretending wasn't- but obviously had to be- excruciatingly heavy, it would serve him right. Though she had the feeling he would somehow contrive to consider it her fault if she dared to mention it before it came to pass. So she just whistled a cheery tune and ignored the affronted glance he sent her way.

"Good freaking grief, this is heavy," Jane groaned, trying to slide the now mostly in one piece, more-or-less-a-vacuum-chamber into the corner near the pumps. She really needed to get more physically active, because this was damn sad considering someone had carried all the parts for miles. "Luke, could you-"

He'd been hovering pretty closely throughout the whole operation, ready to hold things in place or lift heavy objects for her, and swept in to help before she could finish her whine. With the end-table
sized chamber pushed into place against the west wall of windows and the connections securely tightened, it all began to look like a coherent design. They glanced at each other over the thing and smiled, Jane slightly wearily, before going back to their remaining piles of bits and bobs.

Luke had watched her setting up computers and making small readers and sensors like an apprentice watching Da Vinci, peering at her quick, capable little fingers as she soldered and screwed and ran wires. She showed him how to crimp connections properly and was vaguely amused by the determined furrow of his brow as he copied her movements. It wasn't exactly rocket science, though she supposed he did have the way about him of someone who'd never had to hold pliers before, and he might as well get it right the first time. Watching his fingers in turn, deft and clever in their work, she noticed a healed line across the inside of his left grip; like a callus had once been there.

Forbidding herself from falling into further speculation about his person or history, she reached out to guide his hand when it looked like the solder was in danger of going awry. His shock at her unexpected touches had dwindled to a barely perceptible twitch as the afternoon wore on, but she still felt him move as her fingers curled against his knuckles. She'd say he needed to cut back on caffeine, but he didn't seem to consume any; his jumpiness was apparently an all natural feature of being so hopelessly uptight.

Satisfied he was getting the hang of things, Jane left him to it. When he finished with the various tasks she'd set him, he turned back to his own strange components and frowned ferociously at them with a new kind of edge to his concentration.

"Right, so these rings in the chamber are going to function as storage rings and theoretically- if your stuff works the way it should- we'll be able to accelerate two beams today, keep them here all night, and collide them tomorrow in the same device without losing inertia. Thus, making this thing the itty bitty atom-smasher that could." Jane counted off stages on her fingers and only just prevented herself from scratching nervously at her hairline as she looked to him for confirmation.

"Correct." Luke grinned at her triumphantly, then turned to gesture to the device as he recapped the details. "We'll create anti-protons in this section, which functions as a proton synchrotron and uses an iridium screen to cause the reaction, the anti-protons being collected in the vacuum chamber synchrotron, here. Tomorrow, we will create complete antimatter atoms." Looking lit from within with simmering excitement, he crossed his arms in satisfaction.

Jane just shook her head. "Alrighty." She was beginning to seriously question whether she actually hadn't caused Darcy to crash the van when they were chasing weirdness in the desert the previous spring- maybe she'd been in a coma this whole time. It would make her life a lot easier to understand.

Luke narrowed his eyes at her, somewhat playfully and somewhat dangerously, she thought. "You are not pleased?"

"I'll be pleased when it works." Maybe. It was hard to determine how she would feel, it was too large to properly contemplate. It was as if she'd been wading in the ocean and gotten swamped by a big wave that carried her away to parts unknown before she'd really realised what had happened. When had this project slid out of her usually vise-tight control?

The grin returned, wide and wicked. "Not doubting me, are you Jane? It would not be wise."

"Oh, I don't doubt you." She checked over the last of the many hookups for the observational array and wiped her hands on her jeans. "That's what scares me."
He laughed and it was the first time that she could remember him ever having done so. It was a light, tinkling laugh, much more boyish than she would have imagined if she had thought to imagine what it would sound like. It felt like progress, and she found herself smiling at him, feeling that they were heading off on some kind of adventure together. They were bound to discover something.

Even if they just discovered that she was ridiculous to expect this to work and he had simply been fundamentally confused about names and concepts.

"So," she said, running her hand along the (somewhat haphazard) surface of their Frankenconstruction and checking it over for basic soundness. It wouldn't do to blow up the lab, and while she didn't see how they could achieve that with what they'd put together, it felt like a possibility. "No external power."

"Well..." He was rubbing his thumbnail, she couldn't decide if the presence of his nervous tic in this context was a terrible sign or not. "There is an external source, but it... I could not make it clear to you, Jane. You must trust me."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

She wriggled her fingers at him. "That's what I said. Do whatever. I'm ready for something to happen. I'll catch any reaction that goes on with this set-up. If this all falls apart, we're just going back to stellar dynamics 101 next week. We can build a miniature radio telescope. It'll be fun."

Luke looked enchanted by her hyperactive, pre-emptive disappointment blocking and seemed on the cusp of laughing again. "This is an extremely interesting side of you, Jane. I had not thought you would become so ambivalent at the moment of truth. Are you afraid we will fail or afraid we will succeed?"

She did laugh, but it was a bubbling giggle that basically answered his question. "I am so ready for this to work, really. I- for some reason- actually think it will. And I worry about myself for thinking that."

"Just for yourself? Am I beyond saving, then?"

"I can't be worrying about you any more than I already am, sunshine. You are such a problem, I've decided to just completely believe in your sanity and fly into this thing on a wing and a prayer. This is rock of ages cleaving faith, Luke. I'm committed to you knowing what you're doing so hard, because you said you'd bring in imagination and you certainly have and you've certainly proven you can take us new places with it. I've nailed my colours to the mast of innovation, here." She huffed out a breath and tried to stop hyperventilating. "This was supposed to sound more inspiring and less like you've dragged me into a cult."

He huffed out a breath, amusement sparkling in his eyes. "Your confidence is tremendously comforting."

"So is your flippancy... let's- let's do this." Jane pretended she didn't feel like a complete tool for using those words, but Luke, in his tragic ignorance of any and all cliché, didn't even react. She was kind of glad Darcy wasn't around for this, because if Darcy were here, there were so many things about her behaviour that she would never, ever live down.

"Prepare yourself, then." He gestured her toward her station with a haughty flick of his elegant fingers and she noted that the trend of dictatorial hand motions was continuing.
"I am prepared, you have permission to launch."

He raised an eyebrow at that, either because he recognised that he was being told off in an incredibly soft, some might say passive-aggressive, manner or because he didn't understand the reference; she wasn't going to quibble.

"All systems go," she added, by way of not clarifying.

Ignoring her- or figuring it out- he turned to the machine and ran his fingers along a line of writing on some raised silver material that covered the top of the exotic cylinder part from its centre to where it joined to the steel pipe that formed a section of the beamline. The noise of the vacuum pumps was the only sound for a long moment, but soon she seemed to hear- perhaps to feel- a hum inside her own head. Her vision blurred slightly, as if the whole room were suddenly subtly oscillating very fast. There was a dim light in the cylinder and for half a breath she thought she saw a purple-green haze form, thin tendrils of dark smoke winding all around the machine like vines. Luke's hand came to rest on the raised lip at the end furthest from the vacuum, just the very tips of his splayed fingers touching it. He stared down at the spot where his flesh met the metal, his mouth slightly open and his shoulders noticeably rising and falling with his quick, shallow breathing.

Jane looked to her instruments and felt a numbness creep over her whole body, her arms suddenly heavy and her knees weak. It was working. It was making anti-protons at a rate that should not have been possible. None of it should have been possible: the energy needed, the magnets needed, the coolant needed, nothing of what should have been indispensable was there in any form she recognised. Everything she had ever known about particle physics and the limitations of the technology was melting in on itself.

She'd thought she had been absolutely prepared for this to work, cavalier in her approach to the game-breaking innovation it would comprise because she'd already lived through the most stunning game-changer it was possible to imagine and she'd taken it in stride. She had thought that she genuinely believed Luke when he said he could do this, because he was just off enough from all her experience, just crazily brilliant enough, that it seemed like anything and everything could be within his reach. She knew now that she hadn't believed. Not for a moment- until this instant- did she truly understand and accept the implications, the massively far-reaching madness, that this would actually entail. The world had realigned itself and she too had begun walking a path from which there was no turning. Not back, not aside.

For the second time in two years, she felt her mind expand.

She returned her attention to Luke's broad back, his sharp shoulder blades outlined by the taut fabric of his shirt as he held one arm out stiffly at his side and the other toward the device. Her vision narrowed to a pin-prick, all of her awe and uncertainty and wonder concentrated on this person who had needed only a little guidance, some pretty minor professional assistance, to bring science as she knew it to its knees.

Who are you?

Time seemed to stop; her breathing was deafening, her own heartbeat echoing in her ears. The moment stretched on and on, her equipment buzzing with impossibilities and his stillness like a touchstone around which the world now turned. Then it was suddenly over. The air thinned to a normal density and the afternoon sun that she last remembered streaming in cheerfully at the windows had, in the interim of lost-endless time, dimmed to twilight.

Luke glanced at her over his shoulder and started to say something as he made to turn around, but instead he staggered involuntarily backward, catching himself against the device. Bluish smudges of
fatigue marred his fair skin and his eyelids drooped very low. Reacting on an instinct that cut through the paralysis of shock, Jane rushed over to support him and nearly buckled under his weight as he slumped against her. Gritting her teeth, she half-prodded, half-dragged him towards the couch and guided his collapse so that he landed on it more or less comfortably. His long body was sprawled across the cushions, twisted awkwardly because of his feet still being on the floor, and with his inky black hair spreading like an oil slick against the white vinyl, it wasn't exactly the picture of his usual dignity.

She lifted his legs onto the couch, though they overshot the end by quite a ways, and tried to shift him off of his arm and onto his back so that he wasn't cutting off the circulation. Her dazed brain was grateful for the mundanity of that concern, the little problem giving her something to look after which was easy to straighten out.

"I didn't realise..." he murmured to her, sounding very sleepy, "I didn't realise I'd been awake so long. It's night."

"Yes," she said. She didn't know what else to say.

He hummed sweetly in response, a high tenor note. "Were we successful?"

"We were."

He smiled tiredly, his eyes already closed. "Did I not promise you, Jane? Did I not promise?"

She straightened his over shirt, pulling it closed again where it had fallen open around him, and watched as his breathing became slow and deep. Even passed out with exhaustion, there was still tension in his face, some unmet expectation.

"You did," she said, and she stared at his sleeping frown, his sad young face, forever weary with expressing all that vanity and terrible, vicious insecurity. Always awash in his pervading arrogances and inferiorities, an open book of his emotions that told her everything and nothing. A perfectionist and a defeatist, he'd been at once so certain and so despairing of all those things he had fiercely promised her were possible. "You're a man of your word."

She touched a lock of his hair, silky-soft and strange between her fingers, and felt desperately alone.
Mend

There was time in the morning. Time for her to sleep through both her regular alarm and her backup alarm. To concede that her trailer was becoming an oven and decide to avoid broiled brains by stumbling out into the blinding mid-morning sun and over to the lab to get cleaned up. To shuffle back to the trailer for the change of clothes she'd forgotten. To have three cups of tea and stare stonily at the observational array as if it were toying with her emotions deliberately.

Time enough for her to notice Erik striding purposefully toward the door and sprint out to catch him before he could come in. To have several entire conversations in heated whispers. About the fact that quiet was necessary because Luke was asleep, what the hell Luke was doing sleeping in the lab, how the laws of physics may not actually apply to all people equally, a disagreement about the nature of an entirely hypothetical anti-matter engine and whether dark energy was a thing that could be harnessed given sufficient understanding, whether they'd been drinking again in Erik's absence, and if there was such a thing as too much sleep. Unable to organise any section of her feelings about the impossible particle accelerator, she'd told her mentor and friend to hold everything for a little while and she would call him. There was too much to process right now for her to also handle moderating the inevitable, and no doubt contentious, discussion the three of them would have when she told him about the experiment.

Erik pretended to be offended that she felt he'd need moderating and, without having had a single thing explained to him, left looking wide-eyed and frazzled. Jane sympathised.

Plenty of time to head back inside and pull up a plastic chair and creepily watch Luke sleep. It wasn't like she was really watching him sleep, it was more that she still couldn't believe he'd done this thing, that they'd done this thing, and she was trying to talk herself out of the crazy loop.

She'd thrown a thick Navajo blanket over him before she left for the night, the temperature plunging rapidly as the wee hours approached. He had kicked it halfway off, presumably as the warmth of sunrise blazed in through the glass walls, and his lanky limbs were all askew with the fidgeting, making him an even worse fit for the narrow couch than he had been. His head was thrown back and his under shirt was stretched out by some rolling-over tangle, exposing the long, graceful line of his pale throat like a marble column. Jane chewed her thumbnail and felt like she should cover the vulnerable area even as she wrestled with an absurd urge to calculate the slope of it. To graph him until he shrank to fathomable proportions, attempt to grok him in safety while his intimidating and distracting personality was shuttered behind his eyelids.

It was when she was making her fourth cup of tea that he woke. Suddenly. Jumping directly from coma to ramming speed, he'd blinked once and then shot up in a state of full alertness, casing the room with his eyes and looking a little like an alarmed meerkat.

She poured more hot water and stalked over to place a cup on the coffee table near his hand. "Good morning," she murmured, neutrally.

"Jane," he said. He blinked again and the tension in his shoulders dialled down a notch.

"That's tea for you." She pointed to the cup. "I have a clean set of clothes Erik keeps here, and the shower's in the alcove. You know how to work a stall shower?"

He frowned at her, whether at her distant tone or her questioning of his ability to bathe himself, she didn't know. She wasn't paying attention to him anyway, instead she retrieved a t-shirt, jeans, and a belt from the last drawer of her filing cabinet. When she piled them in front of him he wrinkled his
nose and looked like he very much wanted to tell her exactly where to shove them, but he closed his eyes and swallowed and didn't say anything.

"You're about the same height and there's a belt. It'll do. So go shower. Absolutely no further science or conversation until after. I have this intuition that you are not a morning person and I am being thoughtful." She also had a certainty that he was very particular about his person and wouldn't dream of being smelly or walking around in an outfit he'd slept in, so it was definitely that she was being thoughtful and not that she desperately needed him to shut himself up out of her sight for a few minutes.

He was savaging her with eyebrow sarcasm, but he stood and strode aloofly past her, carrying himself with such kingly dignity that he seemed to fill up the entire lab with his presence. Not that he really needed to go out of his way to make her feel tiny. Despite the fact that he was in stocking feet and she was in her desert boots, the top of her head only barely came up to his clavicle. Looming deliberately to remind her of it was just rude.

"Do," he was muttering darkly, "one does not merely do."

Jane watched him until the bathroom door slammed shut, then she turned back to her equipment and thought again about the ends of the universe and the fact that she'd walked beside literal living legends. Cooked breakfast with one. She thought about Luke's piercing gaze and his badly hidden desperation. His volatile moods and contrary stillness.

He'd done this. He'd do more. With her continued help and guidance, as well as her practical knowledge of the applicable technology and skill for cutting corners, who knew what the limits of his genius might be? If there were any. What was her biggest responsibility here? Getting the accelerator out to the world, studied and broken down the moment it was humanly possible to do so, or seizing this amazingness with all of her strength and holding on until she found out everywhere it could lead? Her choice, no matter the cost, had always been to hold on to discovery until the absolute bitterest end- until she couldn't hold on any more. She'd met this kind of dilemma before and she knew that nothing had changed. This was her baby, her life, the stuff dreams were made on: no one was going to take it away from her this time.

The world could wait until she found out how deep the rabbit hole was, because there'd be no going back if she went public. No peaceful continuation of the project on their terms, probably no further pursuit at all until the accelerator was fully understood and the circus around it died down. How could that be the right thing? It wasn't like Jane owed the formal academic community for much, it certainly wasn't like she could summon up enough scraps of loyalty to think that she should report to SHIELD before she even knew what she was dealing with. Not when she wasn't at all assured they wouldn't snatch it out of her hands again, bury it, and tell her it was for the best. She might be giving up an opportunity for all mankind if she faltered in her step at this crucial moment.

She felt like Neil Armstrong going down a ladder.

Luke emerged from the bathroom looking tetchy and out of sorts. His wet hair, loose and tucked behind his ears, was longer than it had appeared to be in its usual style, the ends just brushing his shoulders and leaving a damp ring on the collar of his too-big t-shirt. Erik had been getting a bit sensitive about his spare tire lately and a forgiving double XL was a bit more coverage than Luke's trim torso required. The shirt's neck gaped and the uneven hanging of the hem almost managed to camouflage the fact that Luke had to cinch the jeans way in with the belt to keep them from sliding off his slim hips. A flash of pale skin was visible as he lifted his hand to sip the tea he'd taken with him. He looked like a damn teenager, this scientific revolutionary, all sharp angles and loose fabric.

She stared at him a moment, her daze not dissipated by his brief absence. She bit her lip nervously
and patted the couch beside her.

He watched her hand distrustfully and could have been all of seventeen between the petulant frown on his face and his baggy outfit rendering him smaller and messier and more human. She had almost opened her mouth to say something stupid before he stalked over and sat down, taking that strange not quite camp fire-style pose with his ankles crossed on the floor. He seemed dreadfully out of place and somehow woefully under-dressed, even though he was finally appropriately clothed for her kind of lab environment. His eyes met hers as clearly and expectantly as ever, their colour an unnervingly vivid, swirling aqua in the direct mid-morning light. Like Earth from space.

Jane sipped her tea, then forced herself to put it down when she realised she was getting mad jittery and the last thing she needed was any more caffeine.

"So yesterday, what we did- what mostly you did, really- do you, you know, actually understand how big of a deal that was?" She ran her hand through her hair and scratched nervously at her scalp, tucking away the unwelcome thought that she'd probably rub herself bald with the habit at the rate she was going.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, but he was still sort of frowning. "I understand that your empiric technical knowledge and my innovation allowed us to overcome an obstacle in our path. I had thought precisely that quality of complementary synergy was the reason we were working together."

Her fingers got tangled in her hair and she yanked them out impatiently. "Luke, your mystery material that you couldn't explain to me has broken the scientific glass ceiling. All of particle physics might have to be rewritten because of what that machine that we built- in one day- can do."

Luke shrugged a little, but there was such a gleam of self-satisfaction in his expression that he managed to smirk without moving his face. "My concern is our research, the device allows us to move forward. What you do with it after we have investigated this avenue is not of interest to me."

"Have you heard of an organisation called SHIELD?" Her heart was loud in her ears and she half expected that this day would end with both of them locked up in some super-secret bunker three miles underground, but whatever. As weird as Luke acted, as mysterious as he continued to be, she could no longer kid herself that she wasn't going to trust him with the whole of her research. She had to, she had to give him absolutely anything he could use because look what he could do with just a little help.

And damn it, she liked him. He made it kind of hard and kind of way too easy, and she wanted to find out what his deal was more every time he seemed offended or bewildered by her interest. There was shit buried in that yard. Bones.

Politely ignoring her subtle panic attack, he squinted at her speculatively and tapped his index finger against his mouth, prompting her to wonder if he was going to drop a bombshell on the conversation. Finally, he tilted his head and said, "It does sound familiar."

"That's it?" She touched his leg in hopes of grounding him on her side and he stared at her hand like she'd put it somewhere way less innocent than his kneecap; she patted him again anyway. "Nothing else to say?"

"I have heard of them, but I know nothing more than that they are organised and apparently well-funded, interest themselves in the unusual, and likely know much that they keep from your people." He tucked his feet to the side, pulling further away. "You suspected that they sent me? That's what all your reservation has been based upon?"
"Not all of it, but yeah. I've dealt with them before. I'm still... dealing with them. Look..." She did look at him, and he looked back with more of that terrifying focus. He so had some idea of what was coming, she was sure of it. Somehow, she still wanted to trust him; he was so shady and she just wanted to trust him anyway so badly. She had faith in him. "Last summer, right, I'd been observing this predictable stellar weirdness and I was getting really excited about it, so I called in Erik. And..."

There was an incredibly long silence and he regarded her steadily, waiting. She shook her head and his lips twitched in a soft, reflexive smile that she had no clue how to interpret.

"Dr. Selvig is very important to you, your academic mentor, but it's more than that isn't it? Your father's friend and colleague, your guardian. Did you ask him to confirm your discovery because of his greater experience or because his acquiescence would also be approval, would also be pride? And yet you shared a discovery of tremendous importance with me this past evening and did not inform him. You thought perhaps today you would finally tell me what you have been working on recently, but he does not wish it and you are hesitant. I suppose, Jane, that you must decide which judgement is the one you most trust. His or yours." He leaned forward and there was some profound knowledge in the gaze that met hers, compassion in the fingers which trailed lightly over her hand where it rested on the cushion between them. "I've told you before that I believe in your instincts. I will listen if you wish to speak, I will not abandon our work together if you wish to be silent.

"I have no desire to punish you for loyalty. I understand its power."

She felt cold and nervous, the weight of indecision pulling her down. It would no longer be his sanity that was in question if she went through with this. "Well, is he right?"

Luke cocked his head.

"To tell me not to trust you."

He smiled, but it was small and broken and his eyes were shimmering slightly. Something wrong twisted itself through his expression, a crack appearing in the façade of his cool beauty and allowing hidden horrors to show, a strange spike of anger and bitter humour and hurt worming through the thoughtful look he was trying to affect. There was something very bleak about his honesty when he said, "Most likely."

"Then I trust you."

He scowled at her in something like outrage, though he didn't seem surprised. "Of all the foolhardy nonsense. Why? When I've just..."

She interrupted with a hand gesture as he was so fond of doing himself, and told him, "I'm contrary."

The giggle this startled out of him was a tiny bit hysterical, his grin a rictus. "I do lie, you know."

"Everyone does," she allowed easily, not reacting when this pronouncement provoked a very strange look. "Have you lied to me?"

"Not... particularly. " He seemed mildly annoyed by the admission.

"Sounds legit." Jane smiled and shook her head at him. She wondered if he realised it was his deliberation that sold her, that he had to think about whether Erik's concerns were justified or not. His motives weren't simple, whatever they were, and she would have been hard pressed to believe a simple yes or a simple no. The fact that he was a somehow dangerous person was not new information and wouldn't have been shocking even if it were, and she was almost insulted that he would warn her he was manipulative. Like she hadn't noticed. "You want to grab a snack?"
His lip curled up slightly as he leaned away from her. "I have found your concept of appropriate sustenance somewhat lacking."

*Deflecting.* She rolled her eyes and started to rise to get something anyway. She was hungry. "Well excuse me, Your Highness."

His fingers twitched, but for once he had no rejoinder.

"There's a toaster strudel in that freezer with my name on it. Then we'll talk. I think you know about what, though I hope you don't know too much or I'm probably going to have the MIB poking around here making my life difficult." She pushed her terrible breakfast into the toaster and leaned on the counter, chuckling at herself. "Men in black other than you, I mean. You can see why our brains went there."

Luke, not having moved from the couch, stared at the coffee table with a look of blanket annoyance and crossed his arms. "I have not the faintest notion what you are babbling about."

"No movie theatres in Swaziland?" It was half teasing and half an actual question.

He made a confirming noise in the back of throat. "For me, no, I would have had to cross the border to South Africa. What is it about seeing the same production of a play over and over again that your people find so appealing?"

Jane paused, never having given it any thought. She shrugged. "If you like something, why wouldn't you want to experience it again? It's like re-reading a book. There's always something new because you're not exactly the same as the first time you read it. Your mood or stuff you've learned, whatever, it changes things. I'm not the biggest movie person, but I'm sure there's lots of reasons."

"I could never have imagined so many ways to waste time as are in this room alone." He gazed around, looking a little helpless. "Is not life brief enough for you?"

She groaned, despairing of him. "It doesn't feel brief if you never have any fun. Honestly, lighten up."

The toaster dinged and she focussed on smearing icing on her strudel, coming over to throw herself back on the couch when the little pastries were thoroughly saturated. She sighed in contentment as she took her first bite.

"If you find that delicious, I truly pity you," Luke commented, watching her.

"Snob."

"If that means that I have standards for what I will eat, then certainly."

Jane giggled and thought the word applied to him more broadly than that. "You haven't even tried it."

"I have tried sufficient foodstuffs from frozen paper boxes to know that they are all unsuitable for consumption. Which was one." He lifted his foot to rest his ankle across the opposite knee, his toes tapping against the air. "You require a cook, Jane. Your diet is unwholesome."

Torn between laughing, outrage, and being oddly touched, she just shook her head.

"Are you going to tell me what you began to tell me earlier sometime before you drop dead of malnutrition?" his wry tone was slightly strained, his raised eyebrow more questioning than sardonic.
“Erik flew out and we drove into the desert to view the phenomena I’d been observing,” she blurted, trying to outpace her doubts, “but it had changed. It was lit up like the Northern Lights. There was stratocumulus suddenly everywhere, a clear sky filled in moments, and this swirling electrical storm. We chased it to investigate and...”

Frozen and pale with apparent shock, Luke stared at her for what felt like hours before whispering, "And?"

"And someone was inside."
Luke listened raptly as she cautiously, haltingly elaborated on her little pronouncement. He was hanging on her every word, silent and tense as a bowstring; she could have counted all the tendons in his hands. As if the fate of worlds depended on her story, his eyes seemed to will her to speak faster and faster, to finish at once and to go on forever.

Jane told him about the strange man who had materialised out of the desert, how he'd been babbling and disorientated and they had assumed he must be drunk. She told him about the unexplained markings and runes in the sand she had been unable to interpret, the sudden appearance of which had her so flabbergasted that she didn't even ping to how profoundly not kosher it was that an astronomical phenomenon had left intelligible symbols in the dirt at all until some time later. She told him about a shadow on an infrared camera that looked like a person falling, and an escaped patient built like a tank whose every utterance was worryingly odd. Words failed her then and she fell silent, watching him and waiting for the hammer to fall.

His throat worked as he swallowed thickly, then he closed his eyes and breathed deeply like he was trying to get a hold of himself. Nothing came. Concentration alone prevented her from hyperventilating.

"He was from another world," she said, plunging ahead through the last shred of her plausible deniability. "Another planet, another dimension- somewhere else. He came through the wormhole. SHIELD jumped in to try to cover it all up, stole everything I owned, but I wasn't going to lay down and die just because they wear black suits and say they're the good guys. He helped me, the traveller, he got me back enough of my notes to go on with my work. In the end, after he left, they seemed to decide I was the nearest thing to an expert on the Einstein-Rosen bridge phenomenon in the world and they've been funding me ever since. There you go."

Luke burst back into motion like he'd been freed from a spell, swooping forward to grab her hand so quickly that she startled at his touch. He lifted her fingers to his lips and pressed a dry kiss just below her knuckles. His grip on her palm and wrist was so tight that it was hurting her, but she couldn't pull away. His eyes shone as they met hers and he shook his head helplessly. "Thank-you, Jane."

She was completely lost, her stomach was still doing terrified little flips. "Thank-you?"

He smiled at her with an aching sweetness she couldn't fathom. "For trusting me."

Momentarily so gobsmacked that she couldn't react at all, she instead back-tracked over her own story and made a mental list of the many, many salient details which she had blatantly left out. The billions of questions that she would have had for anyone telling her something even a tenth as insane as what she had just told him- provided, of course, that she was at all prepared to entertain the idea that they weren't just full-on frothing crazy. She looked up at him, his face lit with some prodigious emotion and his hands still holding hers. "You believe me? Just like that?"

"Should I not believe you?" Luke was regaining his composure now, leaning back into the couch with something approaching the calm arrogance he affected when he thought he was in control of the conversation. Something had shifted in the balance between them, but Jane wasn't quite wrong-footed enough to let him get away with whatever he thought he was getting away with.

"No, you definitely should, because I am telling you the truth. I just find it a bit surprising how... You're taking it pretty in stride for something..." She was being non-confrontational, but there were questions and suspicions that she'd been suppressing for a dangerously long time at this point, and
critical mass could very well be imminent. "You're taking aliens in stride. And yesterday you did the impossible using massive amounts of energy from thin air. I think I've been pretty patient and forgiving about it so far, but I really think you should tell me who you are now."

Jane released her breath and prayed this wouldn't be the end of the project. She had not yet been able to change her messed up priorities.

Luke's face had gone blank as he studied her, but he didn't seem offended or intimidated. His eyes slid sideways and he dropped his head to lean against his fist, a crooked elbow braced on the back of the couch: a posture of thorough contemplation, entirely directed at her. His hair, curling upward from the ends as it dried, fell forward and conveniently shaded his expression from close scrutiny, but she could still see him chewing the inside of his lip and was certain it meant his thoughts were racing behind the cool façade.

"My father lied to me all my life," he announced with chilling tonelessness, glancing at her with an intent but vacant look that transformed his handsome, youthful face into a desolate mask.

Her mouth opened to ask questions even as the breath to form them left her body.

"My- my-" he choked on his words, strangling in the grip of some fierce grief and his mouth twisting with horrible bitterness, "my adopted father. One might perhaps call him, more punctiliously, my kidnapper."

"How old were you?" Jane's mind spun, much bigger questions too numerous to force into words clattering around in her brain. It was typical that the most mundane objection made it out first. She was running back over the things he had told her and was coming up with a few other equations that wouldn't balance. At all costs, she must keep him talking. He was being candid again, writhing in discomfort all the while, and she would use it to get this ridiculous situation under control. She would be where she belonged, in the driver's seat of this magical mystery tour, even if she had to lose all grip on Earth Logic to get there.

"I know that I told you..." he read her mind, "I made it sound..."

"Which parents were killed?" She tried to actually feel as calm and collected as her voice sounded. "More keep popping up."

"All of them, they're all dead," his acerbity was ugly, his usually smooth voice ragged and guttural. "One way or the other."

She got the impression that they weren't talking strictly literal death in all cases.

Her silence in the face of this high melodrama seemed to eat away at what was left of his equilibrium and he watched her like a field mouse watches an owl. She wasn't sure what the least preposterous course of action would be at this particular juncture, wasn't at all sure of how she should take the turn of the subject to his troubled youth. Whether it might be construed as a tenuous step in the right direction. She wished Darcy were there. Darcy's wasn't necessarily the most 'normal' point of view, but she was aggressively practical and Jane occasionally found it a useful reference to know what a sensible person would do in her place. She sighed and Luke frowned, clearly thinking it was directed at him.

"I am a refugee, Jane," he said at length. It was both a legitimately painful truth and an attempt to get one over on her- she could see it all on his face. "That's who I am."

She took a calming breath and instructed herself to recall that patience was a virtue she'd long been
intending to cultivate. "That kind of answer is really not going to cut it this time."

"I was scavenged by my father as a child, plucked up from the conquered ruins of my blood kin and led to believe I belonged truly to my saviours when I was young enough to be thoroughly convinced. They were the elite and the highest authority in their domain, they gave me status, brought me up in their ways, educated me in much not known to your people. I was not told what I was. I most wretchedly discovered. It is perfectly true what I said to you before, I know nothing for certain of what their purposes were and now I never shall. I cannot give you a more satisfactory answer, because I do not know of one."

What the hell was she supposed to make of a line like that? She'd had Thor, God of Thunder, eating her stash of Pop-Tarts and clandestine, secret-technology-having SHIELD field agents stealing her research; both entities had been more or less telling the truth when they were at their most vague and crazy. How was she ever supposed to make a reasonable decision about who to take at their word ever again? Who the hell was he even talking about: who were his biological parents and who were the ones who'd adopted him, and had one set killed the other- was he still saying this was an Africa thing or was this finally an admission that there was more to it than that? Did she want to know? Well, of course she wanted to know, but did she have to know so badly that it was worth digging herself even deeper into whatever his deal was?

Right, because there was ever a chance you were going to let him go without getting into his head. Why do you lie to yourself, Jane, you are a terrible liar.

"Look, I'm not going to ask you to tell me everything straight out, coming from my side of the room that would be a little bit rich. But there is a certain level of candour that I'm gonna need and..." She took a second to count to ten. "Luke, are you in any sense super- or non-human?"

There. It was out in the world now, her wildest and most staggeringly unlikely suspicion. The one that had fluttered up into her consciousness in the most fleeting wisps at the oddest times, and which she had pointedly discarded. It always, even in the circus her life had turned into, seemed the least plausible option to explain any given thing and she had been trying to hold onto the slippery slope that was her logical reasoning ability.

Luke's gaze froze on her a moment, his surprise that she'd said it flat-out briefly evident, then his eyes darted around the room and she observed his muscles tense as if anticipating the need for a swift reaction. He focussed on her again and smiled tightly, but the crinkles around his eyes hinted that some genuine amusement was bleeding through the tension and she didn't know how to feel about that.

"If I said I were, would you be able to contain the questions you would inevitably have? For the sake of knowledge?"

Well, that was a non-answer. She raised an eyebrow at him. "It is a lot to ask."

He nodded.

"I'm not totally without self-control, you know." She felt hard done by. She had been perfectly able to prevent herself from harassing Thor for every single detail of Asgardian cosmology he had ever been exposed to even after he had whetted her appetite by explaining the World's Tree. Though she had to admit that she regretted it and would never have held back if she'd realised he'd be gone before she got another chance.

"That may be so, but given that the evidence has generally been inclined otherwise, I'm confident you will forgive me if there is some doubt." He was reading her mind again. He knew she was
admitting it in her head.

Jane was sure she was pulling a weird face, but she couldn't tell if he was deliberately teasing her or not. He could be genuinely, politely matter-of-fact to the point of astounding obtuseness and he could be sarcastic with such a precise, razor-edge of dryness that he could have split an atom with a well-chosen word. The difference between the two was a slight smirk hidden in his right eyebrow. She couldn't always tell. That was what made it irritating.

"Luke, if you swear to me that you will eventually tell me absolutely everything there is no compelling reason for me not to know, then I can promise to hold back until you're ready. Those are reasons that I would find compelling. And you have to promise me that'll you'll always share your science knowledge. That can't be off limits."

"I did not say that I met either criterion, Jane. It was a hypothetical question."

She crossed her arms and stared him down, totally unimpressed. "Oh, so you're not?"

"I have not said."

"Unless you're Swaziland's own bigger, better answer to Tony Stark and your village is aware of its own branch of physics, I think you've kind of given the game away with whatever that stuff is you put in our atom smasher. A hypothesis of quantum consciousness and the theoretical abstract mind's real interactions with matter is not an explanation for what that thing did, even if it were provable." Her thoughts started to drift along that track, trying again to put the pieces of his badly inadequate attempts to explain it to her together with something familiar enough for her to recognise the mechanism. The substance he'd brought, the properties it would have to have to behave as a replacement for so many integral components of the atom-smasher. It was too nebulous, and the dark fringes of quantum mechanics were hardly her area; she packed it away for later. She had to stay on target.

He was waiting patiently for her attention to come back to him. When it did, he picked up where she had left off, "Yet you have reservations about your assumption, you still think perhaps it is possible that I am with a foreign government."

"I always seem to have some reservations. Not that it usually stops me."

Luke snickered and then grinned at her, apparently charmed. "You are very fascinating to me, Jane Foster."

"Feeling's mutual," she muttered, utterly unselfconscious at this point in the tortured jumble of the conversation.

"How do you contrive to think so deeply about everything and remain so impetuous?"

Jane snorted in derision. "I don't know. Have you ever asked a mirror that? You could tell me."

He went still for a long moment and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck lift. His eyes flicked over to her. "How astute," he said, almost at a whisper.

"Used to reading and not being read, are we?" Jane guessed, pleased with the look of mild disconcertion on his face. He was so expressive, but still such a mystery. His heart on his sleeve when it came to his emotions and an enigma machine when it came to his thoughts.

Luke just looked at her with burning eyes and she knew she'd guessed right for the second time that day. She had a gratifying inkling that she had put him off his game. He dragged a hand through his
long hair and his slim fingers snagging in the curls seemed to give him momentary pause, as if he'd forgotten it wasn't glued into submission as usual. Jane wondered if he'd ever allowed it free reign in public on purpose before and added an item to the list of things that weren't going his way in this encounter.

"Jane..." he changed tack, his voice gentle and silky with intimacy, "I sought you out and came to you because... at first it was simply because I needed an occupation. A goal. I came to you, knowing who you were, knowing you were the only person- the only connection of which I knew, the only lead toward something in which I could invest my powers and expect a challenge. There is nowhere else for me in this world or in any other: I entirely meant that and I am not at all fond of how often you have forced me to reaffirm it. It is, in fact, one of the more wholly honest and wholly unpleasant things I have ever said. And I said it to you, Jane, because there was nothing left for me to begrudge and I profoundly desired that you feel obligated to indulge me. I was not, at that moment, in a position to suffer your rejection, so I offered up the lamentable truth in hopes you would sense its gravity and not deny it."

"One of the most honest things you've ever said. So not just literally true but, I don't know, metaphorically true, as well. Like, it actually meant what it sounded like, right? As opposed to the literal truth that you use to make it sound like something else. I am familiar." Jane was quite familiar, she had secured multiple research grants in her time after all. "And your big moment of honesty was so you could manipulate me into giving you what you wanted. Are you painting this picture of yourself so I'll feel sorry for you and stop asking questions about your background?"

His mouth hung open and it was like his face couldn't decide between rage and shock. Finally, he threw himself to his feet and paced quickly away from her with his hands clasped tightly behind his back.

Either you're wrong and it hit a nerve or he really doesn't appreciate you catching on. I have no idea which.

"I hadn't planned to paint any image for any benefit," Luke muttered harshly to the wall in front of him, "I was being candid."

He was clenching his fists, one around the other, and she could see the muscles bunching all the way up his bare arms. That right there was another piece that didn't quite fit the puzzle. It struck her that he was, though lean and graceful, awfully solidly built for the lonely intellectual type. He had looked genteelly sophisticated dressed to the nines in his suits and appeared to have a wiry physique she could easily believe from a rogue academic, but now that some of the layers of clothing were gone, she could see that the muscles of his arms and chest were actually deeply carved by a constant, practical use. She couldn't exactly imagine him pumping iron, like ever, and wouldn't explain the functional, compact fitness he'd been hiding. It seemed, therefore, ever more reasonable to assume that he was more than one breed of dangerous. Questions and questions and no answers.

"I am weary of acting at present," he added with finality.

"Me too." She rubbed the bridge of her nose and tried to tell herself she wasn't having any fun chasing him around verbal corners and picking apart his contradictions.

He crossed his arms over his chest and squinted at her. "Do you realise, Jane Foster, that I have personally disclosed to you more about myself than I have ever willingly allowed any but kin to know? You are insidious, creeping curiously beneath my wariness."

Now that was very sad. He'd told her practically nothing.
He smiled coyly at her look, apparently sensing her train of thought. "Facts are not everything, Doctor."

"No," she agreed, feeling drained, "but some of them are pretty important. I need to know for a fact that you're working for- with- me, and just me. Do I know that? I can't tell any more. Have you been trained to fight, by the way?"

"Of course. What is the significance?"

Jane blinked. He seemed really puzzled. Suddenly, she actually felt better. "I guess nothing."

Bemused, he shook his head at her. She'd distracted him from his anger without even meaning to (again), because his arms loosened and then fell to his sides as he tried to work her out. "I have no ties, Jane. This project, you: these are the only things that matter to me. You will know if that should change. I venture a prediction that you shall know immediately."

"Oh, that's not ominous at all." Jane rolled her eyes.

Called on being a drama queen, he looked a tiny bit embarrassed. "I did not so intend."

"Well, you know, I said I'd trust you. That doesn't mean I always believe you, but it does mean I have to take your basically honourable intentions on faith. So I guess you've decided to make it hard for me." She picked up her plate, brushing strudel crumbs from the coffee table, and walked past him into the kitchen area to wash it. "You will explain your mojo to me. It's a question of when."

"Is it, indeed?" He didn't sound impressed by her order.

She shot him a look over her shoulder. "Yeah. You owe me. You owe me big."

"I have propelled you forward generations in your research."

"You did that for yourself as much as for me. Anyway, not enough. I'm holding back a third degree I have a perfect right to and you know exactly how much that sucks for me, because you're just as nosy as I am."

He had strolled up behind her, silent as a cat, and he peered over her shoulder at what she was doing. "I can't apologise for pointing out that I conceal that trait far more successfully than you do."

"Because it's a wild understatement?" She suppressed a shiver of surprise as his shirt brushed against her back. He was crowding her a little and she fancied she could sense his body heat. "Fair enough. But I still see through you."

"It seems you do, yes." His mouth was just above her ear as he spoke and she practically felt the hum of his low murmur reverberating through his chest. He drifted away, laying hands on the atom smasher and seeming to become instantly absorbed in it.

You're a tetchy, cocky mutant-alien-supergenius-test tube baby and you're full of shit; stop being tragic and mysterious so I can get properly pissed at you.

"So, antimatter today?" She followed him and would have deliberately copied his rubber-necking stance at the sink if she could've stretched tall enough to see anything over his shoulder. She came around his side instead and watched the scratchings on his special components glow slightly as he touched them. "What does all that say, anyway? I don't recognise the language."

"I wrote the purposes for which every piece must channel energy. To keep direction clear and
conserve effort." He motioned her out of the way as he circled to the other side of the device, totally ignoring her hint. "The beams have lost no velocity and the machine is prepared to function as a collider. We may complete the experiment whenever you are ready."

That reminded her. She really had to call Erik and tell him... something. Something that made it sound like this was okay and totally a reasonable working relationship to pursue. After antimatter. Then she would call him.

In for a penny...
"You did what?" Erik's complexion was a shade of puce which Jane was nervously certain portended some kind of aneurysm. She had assembled her troops (her troops being Erik and a low-res webcam image of Darcy over Skype) and was attempting to hold a briefing. It hadn't been going that smoothly.

"We made antimatter," she repeated patiently, used to the surreal feeling of saying it by now. "There is an entire half-gram of antihydrogen atoms in my lab right now, as we speak. It's stable and contained in some kind of vacuum-magnetic Tupperware on my desk, like it's no big deal. I think Luke may be the übermensch."

Darcy blew some air between her lips. "Well. Nothing much happens when I'm away, huh guys? I can tell it's no big thing because I think Erik is actually dying from how impossible or dangerous or stupid whatever you did is."

Jane thought about pounding him on the back to see if it would help him breathe, but the odds seemed better he wouldn't appreciate it at all. She patted his shoulder gently instead, trying to look solicitous.

A wide-eyed glare of accusation suddenly whirled on her. "How!"

"Um." She sat back away from him as far as the wall-mounted bench-table would allow, uncomfortable with the fact that she could count every blood vessel in his eyes. "I, uh, I built a vacuum chamber and assembled a short beamline, I explained how atom-smashers work to Luke, I helped him with some calculations and the iridium, the hydrogen, all that. He brought in his own components, he said they were several different alloys made with elements unknown to modern science. I showed him how I build stuff, he watched, then he did his own thing. It worked."

"This was all theoretical on Friday. Jane," Erik's voice was a trifle shrill, he was almost laughing, "you built this in a day."

As if she didn't know that. She shrugged helplessly, holding her hands up. They had. They had built it in a day and it had worked.

"Where did the power come from? That kind of energy isn't just-"

"Did you hop over to New York and ask Tony Stark to borrow a cup of arc reactor?" Darcy seemed enthused by the thought. "I always thought you should team up with him. SHIELD could make that happen, you know. Wait for me to come back, though, I want to meet that guy."

Jane's mouth worked silently for a moment, then she just held up a hand towards the camera. "No, Darcy. Absolutely no. I didn't borrow an arc reactor, Luke said there was an external power source but we were having problems communicating- you know how he sort of struggles with technical language- and he said he couldn't explain it to me. I just thought... why not? Why not let him try on the off chance there really is something here I can't understand?"

There was silence in the trailer, apart from the sad whine of her semi-functional mini-fridge.

"And there was, so..." Jane finished lamely.

Erik crossed his arms, his mouth twisted sourly and a deep gouge of disapproval between his eyebrows. "I'm genuinely terrified I'll be burying you one of these days, child. There's incorrigible
curiosity and then there's a death wish. If your father were here he'd probably be proud, and if I could have washed my hands of the pair of you I would live a lot longer. I try to talk sense to you-you're my witness, Darcy: I try."

"There was definitely an attempt."

"Erik, I know you feel responsible for me." Jane reached for his hand and held it, his strong, callused fingers comforting and familiar in hers, reminding her of childhood and boosts up to the eyepiece of a telescope. "But this is my life and I take the chances I have to take. Maybe I never imagined my research project would turn out so... unprecedented, but that doesn't mean I'm not ready for it. That doesn't mean I give up and go home. I was willing to risk my career on a real long-shot hypothesis, I was willing to let them finish laughing me out of the field; I don't think risking my life is much different. My career is my life."

He leaned closer to put his free hand on her shoulder, staring her down with every ounce of conviction he could muster. "You were doing better than you think. You had a grant, you had a position with a good school to go back to. Not having the standing you deserve in the community is rough, but it's not worth dying to get some respect. There's no shame in plugging away and knowing they're wrong about you."

"Is it worth only maybe risking death if you can find out something extraordinary? If you can change the way we see the world?"

He sighed, sinking down to lean on his elbows glumly. "I can't protect you from your nature, can I?"

"I would say it's a pretty big exercise in futility, yeah. Though it's very nice of you to try." She stretched across the table to give him a little hug. "I know you'd be right in any not-insane universe, if it makes you feel better. I just happen to live an insane life."

"So you filled a synchrotron with antiprotons yesterday, you whipped up some positrons, and today you made antimatter. Just like that. In the same tiny accelerator." His blue eyes looked watery and his skin seemed grey with resignation. Back to all business after an interlude of feelings, as per usual. Jane thought she came by her priorities in life honestly, really.

She nodded. "Luke made some adjustments and away we went."

"But he still hasn't told you where the energy came from?" Darcy cut in, reminding them she was still listening. "Maybe his new elements can convert molecules from the air or something. You don't know what they are, so who knows how they react, right?"

"I guess, but that would really have to affect the composition of the air. I mean, you'd notice. You don't understand what kind of power we're talking about, Darcy. Although Luke didn't seem to really appreciate the magnitude of it either, so maybe you have a point. Maybe he doesn't realise what he's got because he's so... I don't know, is there a word for being precociously naive?"

"Marxist?"

"Very funny. Seriously. He doesn't know the limits, he doesn't understand why I'm impressed by a lot of things. He acts like quantum mechanics is kid stuff, but it seems like he's never been exposed to classical physics as a science. He knows it like common sense, but he can't articulate it in math without help. Is it really possible he could come up with this alloy and apply it without- he didn't even know what a particle accelerator was last week! What was he using it for before?"

Erik was rubbing his chin in thought. "You're really sure everything is what it seems with this
device?"

"I constructed the observational array myself." Jane ran the build through her mind and confirmed her memory that she had allowed Luke nothing more than menial little tasks like trimming wires. He could not have affected it, accidentally or otherwise; not on the first day, anyway. She had left him alone with it for hours afterwards, but she had long since given up remotely suspecting that he was deliberately trying to con her even if Erik hadn't. Besides, he clearly didn't know how to work her computers. "I'm forced to accept that it's possible, because I know he did it."

No one seemed to know what to say to that. Erik had no answers and no more anger, so he sat in silent bafflement and worry.

Darcy was less sobered. "Where is His Mysterious Hotness, anyway?"

"He's eating a late lunch in the lab. I told him I had to talk to Erik about the experiment." Which was true, and she'd foolishly decided it needed to be in private and as soon as Erik arrived, hence why they and her hottest-running laptop were packed into her tiny trailer, which was crowded and hot even with just Jane in it.

"You've got him eating your food by himself?" Darcy had pinged to a story behind that seemingly innocuous statement.

It had been something of an undertaking, actually.

Making antimatter had been much like making antiprotons, with Jane manning equipment and Luke standing at the device, touching it in two places this time. The hum in her head as the process began quickly increased from one bee to a swarm and the purple-green glow from Luke's handwriting had definitely not been in her imagination. She wasn't at all surprised when it worked. She could barely bring herself to look at her instruments, knowing what she would find, her heart stuttering in her chest and her fingers numb. Luke had looked like some grunge vision of a vengeful angel, the extra fabric of Erik's oversize shirt flowing back from his raised arms like drapery and his hair stirred as if by hot air.

When it was over he stood there blinking, staring at the rig. Jane watched him for a long moment, waiting to see if he would wobble or not when he tried to move. He was so still that he didn't betray himself either way. Finally unable to leave it lie, and pretty sure she knew in her gut he'd be much like he had been the day before, Jane walked over and put a hand on his arm. He turned slowly to look down at her.

"Okay?" she probed, squinting at him in mingled concern and speculation.

"I must eat," he announced quietly, slurring very slightly. Jane registered a confirmation of her hypothesis and gave herself a free pass for being more worried about science than his health.

"Come on, you sit down and I'll make you something." She touched a guiding hand to the small of his back, not knowing if he would be as unsteady as the last time, and nearly flinched from the shock of his superheated skin. Trying to swallow around her heart in her throat, she forced herself to settle her palm flat against him and he now felt like a pretty normal body temperature. Had he ever really been that hot or was she just imagining it?

He leaned into her, very slightly, his big blue eyes practically filling her vision as he tilted his head to look at her from so close. "You will forgive me if I refuse your generous hospitality, but I require decent sustenance. I will go and-"
"No, you won't." She moved her hand so her arm wrapped around his ribs, planting her feet in case she needed to brace against his weight and inadvertently pressing her face into his side. He smelled like ozone: wind and electricity. "You said there was an energy source. An outside source. Twice you make it work, and twice you're all stupid exhausted afterwards. That's a repeatable result. I'm not an idiot, Luke. I may do things I shouldn't, but I'm very observant. The deal is, you take my food and shut up or you explain right now how you used yourself to power a reaction that takes something like two hundred billion joules through the power of positive thinking or whatever. Your call."

He swallowed and licked his lips. "I will concede."

"I thought you might."

"You haven't won anything, you needn't be so smug," he muttered, draping an arm over her shoulders now that he'd surrendered to her attempts at help. Even that much of him was heavy for her, but some of the tension in his back muscles relaxed and it was less like she was hugging a stone statue. She'd take that as a sign she was at least a little efficacious as a crutch.

Jane found herself smiling fondly at him, though her pulse still leapt in her throat. "You said, 'I concede'. Sounds like winning to me."

"Stalemate," he insisted, his head drooping towards hers. A curl of his hair brushed her ear and she ignored the tickle with every fibre of her being.

Feeling a bit more confident now that his eyelids were at half mast, knowing he couldn't be watching her nearly so closely as he usually did, Jane wondered how much she could get out of him while he was apparently compromised. "Did you really think you would get this past me? Twice?"

"I had hoped," his silky baritone sank to a quiet rumble as they shuffled awkwardly towards a chair. "I was better prepared for the undertaking than I was on the first occasion, but it also proved more difficult."

She settled him, her hands slipping away as he slouched against the chair back. "You do seem to be doing a bit better, you're not comatose yet. How was it more difficult?"

"Doctor Foster," he reprimanded in a playful, mock-outraged tone that derailed her train of thought, "that would be telling."

"You're silly when you're tired."

"Mmmm...." He sagged and she sort of caught him with her shoulder, using the length of her torso as a buttress to keep him from falling. She couldn't push him back up without his cooperation and found herself effectively pinned to the floor by his weight. Her plight seemed to amuse him. He dropped his hand onto the top of her head and the size of it made her feel like she'd shrunk into a Polly Pocket. "You were correct about me, Jane. You read me accurately. Have I told you that? Of course you have also seen that it is not a sensation of which I have much experience."

"I think you did tell me that, actually. About what in particular?"

"I am also... curious."

"Nosy, I think I said." She'd said both, but she was enjoying being difficult with him while it was so easy get away with it.

"Curious," he ignored her interruption. "I am... curious about you as you are about me. I did not ask endless trivial questions because I read all I could find written of you before coming here."
"I gathered."

"Yes, you would. But there are numerous queries that are beyond the scope of staff biographies and author blurbs."

"One hopes."

"Why did you follow in your father's footsteps, Jane? Was it really the most pressing of your infinite interests to scour the stars for meaning or did you feel a child's most indigenous longing, to live as their progenitor would have them live? Is it your blood or your spirit which directs your sail, Jane?" His hand slid from her head and landed on her shoulder, his fingers passively tangling into her hair and brushing her neck. "Is it your father's desires or yours which define you?"

Supporting him on one side and trapped by him on the other, she felt consumed by his presence and some prodigious importance he placed on her answer, but she wasn't about to start editing herself now. "I always loved the stars. I don't know when I started or how I started, or whether it was because he loved it so much that I first got interested in the sky, but I never... it was never that important what people expected. He thought I should be a teacher, actually. A real teacher, not like I arguably am, doing however many classes I absolutely have to do to fulfil my academic obligations. I would hope he'd be proud of me, but ultimately I don't make choices to please anyone. I make what I think is the right choice."

He heaved himself upright, pulling her with him slightly, the hand resting near her collar tensing instinctively to encourage her to her meet his eyes. "What about Erik Selvig? Did you not moderate yourself considerably because of his wishes?"

"We're here, aren't we? I listen to good advice, Luke, but that doesn't mean I won't do something I think is worth it because I know Erik won't like it. You noticed that yourself."

"I observed your conflict of loyalties." He slumped back, putting his hands in his lap and worrying his thumb. "His approval does mean a great deal to you."

"Well, of course it does, but it's not the end of the world if we disagree. I try not to lose sight of the fact that the older and wiser are perfectly capable of being wrong. He still cares about me even when he thinks I'm crazy. He'll come and help even if he's saying 'I told you so' the whole time. He'll come and help even if I'm saying 'I told you so' the whole time."

Luke stared into the middle distance, looking very morose. "And your father? Would he not be more pleased if you had chosen as he would choose for you?"

"I don't know, he's not here to tell me that, but I like to think he'd be happier that I'm happy. He used to say that we may learn the same constellations, but we all see our own pictures in the stars."

"How poetic." He blinked rapidly and then turned to her, seeming a little lost. "What of your mother?"

"She's kind of... flighty. She became a sommelier after Dad passed and travels a lot, so I don't see much of her these days, but she's always thrilled with whatever I'm doing when she touches down from her latest adventure. She used to be a chemist, not a physicist, and to be honest, I don't think she understands a word of my theories, but she pretends to be interested for as long as she can manage. I don't ask for more than that." She smiled wryly to herself. "She's never been the dictatorial type of mother. Really, she could never bring herself to be the firmest authority figure. My dad didn't like to be, either, maybe that's part of why I have such poor impulse control."
Luke made a tsking sound with his lips. "I am firmly of the opinion that it is inborn and hopeless."

"Probably." Jane grinned. "It's serving me well so far."

"Has it been very difficult for you, Jane? Your choices and education, your unconventional research? This appears to be a quite solitary life, is that as you would have it be?"

She stood from her crouch at his side, her knees having started to ache in protest, and drifted over to the kitchen to look into the food situation. That line of inquiry was such a can of worms, she couldn't muster her usual uncaring spewing of the unvarnished truth. It still hurt a little. She still wasn't as secure as she would like to be, even with SHIELD's backing- they would drop her the moment they had any better 'in' with wormholes or Asgardians than a desert-dwelling crackpot and she knew it. Jane could be back at Culver any day, begging for another chance and fighting an uphill battle. It was never safe to get too comfortable in her life and sometimes it made her very tired. She answered his last question instead, "I have my work, that's all I really need."

"Does that not 'get lonely'?

"I suppose that it must," she quoted his answer, smiling a little. "But it's all right for me. Most people don't understand that my research is always going to be monopolising a big part of my brain and that I genuinely have the most fun when I'm working, and that's fine. I'm weird. I have a few awesome people who put up with me and don't let me wallow too much. Sometimes it's a bit quiet around here, but I'm not alone."

He just looked at her, seeming very young and slightly confused. He shook his head, almost imperceptibly. He clearly didn't know what to say.

She tried to have a reassuring expression as she went back to rummaging. "Well, I really ought to call Erik and get him over here, tell him a bit about the experiment. I can't exactly keep it from him forever. I'll make some eggs while he's on his way and you can have the lab to yourself while I figure out how to break it to him."

"You do not want me to be present?"

"Probably better if you aren't." And how. She could just imagine. If she could keep a buffer between Erik's initial reaction upon total exposure to Luke's impossible impossibleness and their first group conversation about it, she just might avoid some kind of unpleasant incident.

"As you wish. You will do that now?" he sounded both anxious and like he was trying to hold back on belligerence.

"Um, yeah?"

"I am very hungry, Jane."

"Oh, yes, um, sorry. Right on it."

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"Did you ever think he could be from Asgard?" Darcy wondered aloud when it became clear Jane was not going to answer her question or elaborate further on the experiment or the experimenter.

Jolted from her musings, Jane stared at Darcy's image until her brain caught up. "He couldn't be, I've been collecting data non-stop since Thor left. I would have seen the bridge open."
"Okay, but what's really more likely: that he's just some backwoods miracle super-genius human with access to knowledge that modern science doesn't have, that he's from some totally unrelated other planet, or that he comes from the same advanced culture we've already made contact with? Let's be real, Jane. It makes the most sense."

She scratched at her hairline. "I've thought of it, Darcy, believe me. The thought has occurred. He's a bit like they were, but he's also really not like they were, and how would he have gotten here without the bridge? Thor said it was the only way to travel between the worlds he knew. Either his bridge or something just as powerful that would open the same kind of portal. SHIELD may be sneaky and secretive, but I think they would tell me if something like that had happened somewhere I can't observe it. It'd be shooting themselves in the foot not to."

"I'm just saying is all."

"You thought he might be an alien and you didn't tell me?" Erik asked in a disturbingly calm voice.

Jane dragged her fidgety fingers through her hair, grimacing at the table in front of her. "He's not a threat to me, Erik. Believe me on this, I've spent practically every waking moment of over a month with him. He's telling me some version of the truth."

"Some version?"

"Yes, and you know what I mean, don't give me that look. Please don't confront him. Please. I think he's starting to trust me."

Darcy was leaning so close to her screen that only the top of her head was visible, the pink streaks she'd put through her dark hair practically filling the camera's eye. "Jane," she said, very seriously. "Jane, you really do like him."

"I know that, Darcy. Breathe in, breathe out."

"This is two aliens in a row, Jane."

Jane counted off on her fingers, "First of all, I didn't say I liked him like that and second of all, we don't know that he's an alien. Third of all, if you start in on me about this I will drive to your dorm and I will do something rash, and you know I am good for it. I'm thinking perfectly clearly. I'm a good judge of character. It's my lab. Everybody leave Luke alone and he will eventually trust us enough to tell us what his deal is, that's the official line. Breaking of the official line will result in banishment from the lab."

"Oh sure, boss," Darcy dutifully acquiesced, giving a salute that was only a little sloppy.

"I'm not going to let him go unchallenged," Erik groused, miserable about this development. "I don't trust him one bit."

"Just don't ask him if he's an alien, okay?"

"For now."

Breathe in, breathe out.

"So what does antimatter do for you, anyway?" Darcy broke the tension again.

"Well, if you take him at his word, it means an annihilation engine and power for the bridge would no longer be an object."
They all glanced up as if Thor would fall on their heads again.

"This is some Star Trek realness, you guys. I think you may have called it too soon when you said we wouldn't be touring other planets next summer."

Jane couldn't help but agree.
Gift

By the time she surfaced long enough from Darcy's stream of outrageous anecdotes ("This one professor, Jane, my hand to God, this one professor accidentally showed a class of two hundred students glamour photos of his fully articulated, custom-built wolf costume, and the only person who said anything said 'I don't think that's the kind of cultural attire that's politically advantageous, sir' and it may have been me.") to say her goodbyes and step outside, the sky was getting dark. Her belly ached from laughing and her mood couldn't have been better even if she were certain where her research- where her life- was taking her. She enjoyed the thrill of limitless possibilities, including scary ones, a little more than she probably should.

Half expecting that the lab would be deserted, she huffed in amusement at seeing Luke again passed out on the couch in a sprawl of long limbs. He probably hadn't managed to remain upright and mobile for very long after he'd finished eating, not judging by the way he was dragging around before she left. Or perhaps he had: she noticed two piles of neatly folded clothing had materialised on the coffee table, and turning around confirmed that all the dishes had been washed and stacked beside the sink. Well. Jane couldn't fairly expect him to intuitively master her cupboard's esoteric flatware filing system no matter how smart he was. It would have baffled Feynman.

She leaned in the doorway a moment longer, surveying her lab in the dim blue glow of her various screen savers and the light pollution flooding in through the glass walls. Luke's chest rose and fell, his arm covering his eyes to create some artificial darkness. He must be staying pretty damn close by if he could walk there and back in his condition while she'd been gone. The town was tiny, and the next one over was an hour's drive away. It couldn't be Mandy's B and B, the only official temporary lodging available on the main street, because the sign had said the room was free when they passed it the other day. There was an extremely aged railway hotel somewhere on the outskirts, but she wasn't sure it was actually operating any more. The truckers tended to stay in their trucks and no one else really passed through.

Maybe he had an RV parked in the desert and would die of embarrassment when he was found out. She could imagine it; she might even put money on it. Either way, she would find out eventually.

Content, she locked the lab door and turned back toward her trailer.

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It was like the world's dorkiest, most oddly-matched poker game.

Erik was at the head of the kitchen table wearing a forbidding glower and his Serious Professional Scientist uniform, a charcoal grey Calvert U polo shirt and tweed jacket with matching trousers. Jacket and trousers were both a bit old and slightly too small, but he wore them with fierce dignity. Jane was in a nervous fiddling loop to his left, playing alternatively with a pen, the end of her plaited hair, and the falling hem of her Little Miss Naughty t-shirt (Darcy's idea of a joke, but Jane didn't turn down free clothes). Her jeans had small vampire bite rips in the calf from snagging on an open computer case, but they were intact above the knee so she considered them perfectly wearable. Luke sat across from her dressed in some hand-tailored nonsense, including a white, silk shirt with real French cuffs and cuff-links she strongly suspected of being gold. He hadn't bothered to comb his hair for the second day in a row, and it curled away from his face into a natural tousle which was attractive at a level she found totally unfair.

Three questionable fashion decisions stared each other down across the linoleum in the middle of an ex-auto showroom turned physics laboratory-slash-observatory with showroom windows and a truly
eclectic collection of vinyl and chrome furniture. In the desert. At two fifteen in the afternoon, because none of them had remembered to set an alarm and Jane had slept in until a reasonable time to have lunch. But it was all very serious. A serious meeting to be taken seriously.

Jane wondered where she had gone wrong in life.

"Jane tells me the two of you have overcome the hard limitations of particle physics and created cheap antimatter," Erik's voice broke the Mexican stand-off which had settled over them as they took their places at the table. Jane doubted his tone would help to resolve tensions.

Luke wasn't the least intimidated. "So I have been informed. I was not well-versed in the discipline."

"No," Erik agreed thoughtfully, "I could tell that you weren't. How do you account for such a diverse understanding of the mechanisms of the universe without access to the building blocks that scientists use to form those understandings, Jane?"

She started in surprise when he turned the question on her at the last moment, his eyes flicking from Luke's to hers. Jane cleared her throat and folded her hands on the table, trying to take this half as seriously as Erik clearly wanted her to. She had been ready to press ahead and deal with repercussions after the dust cleared, but he seemed determined to get his interrogation in regardless of her protests. At least she'd firmly vetoed disassembling of the device and grilling Luke about the parts. It had involved flashing her biggest, most soulful and glistening puppy eyes; when that didn't work, she'd told him trust was a two-way street and she wasn't prepared to negotiate to what extent he was allowed to torture her research partner.

"He did have some formal background," Jane deflected, nodding towards the mystery himself, "you went to school all over and Oxford for a while, you said, and I can see gathering ideas more than… you know, crunching the numbers, if you're that kind of learner. It's not totally outside possibility, obviously, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"But you created new quinary alloys, that's a different area again; where did you learn metallurgy? Not at Oxford." Erik turned back to Luke and blinked innocently. Jane wanted to roll her eyes.

"I'm a hobbyist, Dr. Selvig. I have acquired many trades from many teachers." Luke smiled winsomely at Erik, giving as good as he got, and Jane now wanted to knock their heads together.

Erik seemed to realise he wasn't going to win, or even keep up, in any kind of verbal fencing match and decided to lay his cards on the table. "You're from a small and troubled African nation, but you have access to unknown elements and the advanced application of those elements. You appeared out of the aether to join up with our little operation in the middle of nowhere without asking for any kind of reimbursement for your time. And you don't seem to have anywhere else to be. I don't know what that adds up to, but it adds up to something."

"Naturally," Luke said, "it adds up to my being wealthy and well-travelled and sadly bored by what little stimulation the world at large has to offer to an inquisitive mind. If I pursue novelty and I have means and time to pursue it as thoroughly as I pursued this, why is it difficult to believe that I have discovered a fringe your insular scientific community has never noticed coming into existence? I am surprised at you, Dr. Selvig, discounting the concept so completely after what you have seen first hand."

Erik pulled at the skin under his chin and looked between Jane and Luke with calculation in his eyes. He couldn't know whether Luke was talking about the earlier incidents in his career which he had barely told Jane about or whether Jane had told Luke about Thor. It occurred to her that she probably should have brought him up to speed on the fact that she'd blabbed the big one, but she found herself
not regretting failing to do so at all. What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander.

"All right, granted the fact that there's a non-zero probability of literally anything happening and sometimes it does, there could be three new elements and clean energy being put to good use by private enterprises in Kyrgyzstan right now and maybe you could have discovered this kind of thing on your own." His tone made it clear that he sincerely doubted it, but he was willing to allow it in the interests of moving on. "Even if those components of yours have all the necessary properties as a natural factor of their composition, how were the particles accelerated in such a short beamline- how did you generate the energy needed for the reaction?"

Worrying his thumbnail again, Luke chewed his lip once before answering, "I would think you have some theories."

"I would think so, too, but annoyingly I haven't got the foggiest."

Luke's gaze didn't waver from Erik's face as he digested that, but his eyes subtly widened and his jaw went the tiniest bit slack. Jane could tell he was utterly stunned and could practically feel his burning need to look over at her and try to ask her what the hell she was playing at with eyebrow messages. Instead he took a breath and shrugged with pointed nonchalance. "Could it not also be attributed to the device?"

"You don't know everything it does?" Jane cut in, diverting the line of questioning slightly.

They both turned to her, Erik with an irritated 'I was getting to that' frown and Luke with shining gratitude that made him seem terrifyingly breakable. Luke said, "I never said that I created the alloys," and while his tone was businesslike, his expression was all for Jane, agonised and puzzled and hopeful. She tamped down some fluttery nervous response to all that uncertainty and tried to convey to him not to say anything without making any stupidly obvious gestures.

"You pick up fringe technology and you don't share it?" Erik took the bait, crossing his arms and putting his chin to his chest as he stared Luke down disapprovingly from under a furrowed brow.

"I shared with Jane," Luke defended, and his accent was so clipped that it wouldn't have sounded out of place if he'd started referring to himself in the royal plural like Queen Victoria. "Jane will share with the world."

"Personal pursuit doesn't come before the good of humanity! Scientific progress belongs to the world, you have a duty to- Jane!" Erik spread his hands and gave her a helpless look.

She didn't disagree, but at the same time, it was more complicated than that. Particularly in this case, where she had recently finished deciding that it was more important to pursue her research to its furthest extremity before bogging herself down in the endless bureaucracy and politics of the professional community. Not to mention the shadiness of S.H.I.E.L.D and their private idea of what constituted the greater good. She pushed her pen along with her index finger as she stalled, "I do have a duty, I think everyone does, especially someone with my education and the privilege of an opportunity like this. I take that very seriously, but we do have to use our judgement about when is the right time to go public. It's not as simple as going on the five o'clock news. The community can bury you when you say something they don't like, something that'll shift the paradigm, even if it's the truth."

"Scientists-"

Jane put up a hand and glared sternly at her mentor. "Don't tell me scientists are above factionalism and bias and flat-Earthing, Erik, don't tell me that. I know personally that that is not true. In an ideal
world we'd all go where the evidence takes us and remain impartial, but this is the real world. People are people, and people fall short of ideals even when they are trying their hardest."

A computer fan roared to life and all three of them jumped a little. Luke recovered first, but he was still tracing his lip and running obvious calculations over his internal sketch of Jane. She seemed to have given him something to think about.

"Not that it's all awful or anything," Jane added, "I just…"

Erik leaned over and patted her shoulder to show he understood what she meant, a tiny bit of contrition on his face for having nearly put his foot in it.

"I would explain my methods and materials to you both, and I would entrust you with teaching your community about them, but I'm afraid I still lack the necessary finesse with jargon," Luke said by way of conciliation.

"You're doing really, really well," Erik assured him ruefully. "Much better than I did for years when I was learning English terminology, and I had something to translate from. They try to keep it pretty standardised, but physics is an old field."

Luke bowed his head in acknowledgement, making a subtle flourish with his left hand.

"What should be our next step? We've got potential multiple petajoules of pure kinetic energy right now and we can make more any time, now what?" Jane had some thoughts, but she wanted to test the waters and form something that at least resembled a plan of action. She'd never needed so much input before, being- to put it nicely- something of a tenaciously independent spirit.

"I will leave the design and construction of whatever harvesting engine is necessary to your superior experience and understanding," Luke said quietly, his voice low and smooth. Jane supposed it was his lack of defensiveness and the absence of the abrasive veneer of his habitual arrogance which made him sound so much more at ease. It changed him when he managed to relax. "Of course, I will be anxious to assist and to learn."

"Right, but then..." She felt that sensation in her stomach like she was in a roller coaster cresting the first hill, about to go over.

"Then I will have more to say and more to do, and I will craft you wonders from quantum entanglement to rival the miracle of the toaster strudel." Luke grinned mischievously at her, and Jane found herself blushing at someone else's goofy joke. That was a first. He laughed at her reaction and her flush deepened.

Erik looked away with a long-suffering sigh. "Sounds promising. We're going to need to figure out how we'll capture the energy when we allow the antimatter to annihilate. I was planning on going into the city next week, anyway, if there's any industrial material you think we can use. I'll try to bring back enough precautionary equipment to keep us all from drowning in gamma rays if we start poking quarks with sticks. SHIELD gave me a budget for project resources to supplement yours, Jane, but granted the number of zeroes they might not have bothered naming a figure."

"Can we come?"

He practically made a Scooby sound, his head whipping back to face her. "What?"

"Well, Darcy has been dying to show me what I'm missing by choosing to live alone in the desert for so long and it's probably as well we're all there to figure out how we're going to proceed if we find anything workable. It's not like we have access to a reactor core, we might build the whole thing into
the bridge opener and save motions. You can help, can't you, Luke?"

"I-"

"I'm sorry, I should have asked that more like an... less... do you want to come? I'd love to have you, but you don't have to or anything."

His slow smile was guileless and adorably lopsided, just the left side of his mouth tugging upward in pleased surprise. "Yes, thank you."

The brainstorming session had broken up for dinner around eight and having gorged on half a small roasted chicken she'd made, Jane had found herself feeling thoughtful and claustrophobic. She switched on the neon-starburst fascinator sign that crowned the lab and went looking for kindling.

Stirring the fire with the end of a stick until flames started leaping high and bright, Jane then threw it in and settled her blanket more closely around her shoulders. The dry air was chilling rapidly and the cold was starting to seep into the collar and sleeves of her jacket. She crossed her legs on the ratty lawn chair and pulled her feet up towards her, tucking the edge of the blanket under her boots.

The roof was still her sanctuary. With the chairs turned out to face the desert, the only sign of civilisation she could see was the vague halo of back light from the town encroaching on the edge of the absolute blackness. Jane could fancy herself alone in the universe for as long as that thought remained appealing. It had been some time, actually, since she'd felt the need. Her brooding after Thor's departure and her first few failures to launch had taken the form of a listless revision, paperwork and naps, and she'd been thrilled and busy ever since the funk was broken.

Funny how Darcy managed to be right so often.

She reached down beside her for her Thermos of peppermint tea and stared at the grid she'd formed in her brain and superimposed over the stars, breaking up the night sky into closely observed quadrants and hardly observed quadrants. The coordinates of Thor's Einstein-Rosen bridge were in her Closest Observed Quadrant. Blue-shifted cosmic rays, that was what Luke had been mumbling about in his exhaustion when she'd plied him with scrambled eggs and tomatoes the night before, if you knew where to look when the bridge opened.

Jane sipped her tea and rolled over to look at the fire instead.

She remembered Thor's earnest, ingratiating helpfulness as he tried to offer her his knowledge of the universe. Between the language barrier (technobabble to poetic metaphor), Thor's lack of true interest in the subject beyond that it aroused so much wonder in Jane, and her brain falling asleep on her, they hadn't gotten that far. He'd wanted to tell her his cosmology like a story and she'd spent a couple moments thinking about Asgardian culture and wondering how their technology fit into their society before she'd been unable to stop herself interrupting him with more specific questions. Few of which he'd been equipped to answer the way she wanted them answered.

If they built a bridge, if they made contact with Thor's people: what would come of it?

There was Thor and his new found sweetness, his friends and the reassuring fact that they had defended Puente Antiguo on instinct, but there was also the giant metal deathbot. That was from Asgard, too. She had no idea what had been going down on the other side of that wormhole or what exactly had happened when Thor went home. Were these people really safe, were they allies?

Now that it appeared genuinely likely she really might see them again, sooner rather than later, she
had no idea what to expect. She'd been too exhilarated to properly speculate on mundanities back when she was sure it was within her grasp, and then it had seemed like borrowing trouble when she was clearly so far from making progress.

A pebble hit the roof in front of her chair and rolled toward her. Frowning, she followed its trajectory over the side and down to the ground. Luke stood there in jeans and a predictably smart pea coat, his stance slightly nervous.

"May I join you?" he asked stiffly when he saw her looking. He didn't raise his voice at all and if it weren't so dead silent out here at night, she would never have heard him.

Jane sat back and wondered if there had been something to Erik's acerbic comment earlier about whether Luke was just moving in. She decided she didn't care if there was. "Just a second, I'll come down and let you in."

"No need to trouble yourself," his reply drifted up from somewhere below, but she could no longer see him. Momentarily, his hands appeared on the lip of the roof and he shortly pulled himself up as easily as if his feet were on the ground. He walked over to her little camp site and drew the other lawn chair close to hers.

Jane guessed she was sleepier than she'd thought, but she found herself just blinking at him in incredulous confusion.

"It is not a difficult climb," he defended playfully against her look, not even breathing heavily.

They sat together in the quiet for a few minutes. She watched the play of the fire and the shifting of shadows, her eyes sometimes drifting inexorably upward to the stars and sometimes over to him. His fair skin glowed in the warm light while the rest of him was swallowed in darkness, framed as he was by the perpetual black of his hair and clothes. It suited him very well, all that contrast, but she thought it might be nice to rally her sartorial sensibilities and buy him a colour if a suitable opportunity ever arose.

"Jane, today..." Luke tried, his eyes on his fingers twisting together in his lap. "Today..."

"Mmm?" she encouraged, pretending to concentrate on Sirius instead of on him.

He sneaked a glance at her, then dipped his head again. "You did not share with Dr. Selvig your induction that I am personally responsible for the energy of the atom-smasher. Not only did you not tell him I had all but affirmed its truth, you deliberately distracted him from the question and prevented my giving it away when I assumed that you had." Apparently still unable to look at her, he winced at his hands. "You took my part against your own interests, for no purpose I can imagine. Why?"

"I said I'd trust you. I didn't think any one of us needed some Spanish Inquisition hanging over the project from now on, and I wanted to spare you something you're obviously really uncomfortable with. You're giving me a lot, I see that, so I can be patient when there's something you want to keep for a while." She reached over to take one of his hands, forcing him to stop fidgeting. He lifted his head, his eyes moving back and forth between hers, trying to read something he expected to find there. She squeezed his fingers and smiled gently. "I don't want you to feel like... like you're just a means to an end around here. You're not."

His expression told her he didn't believe it, he almost looked nauseated by the suggestion he should. "You wait for me to tell you in fear of driving me off. You indulge me for my abilities as you indulged me at first for my mind. Your curiosity and your need are all that allows me access here."
Jane bared her teeth and let out an exasperated sigh. His paradoxical amalgamation of profound insecurity and pure egoism was severely fraying her patience. "I wanted you to stay before you built the accelerator. I was curious, but contrary to popular belief, curiosity doesn't make all my decisions for me. Everything else aside, I kinda like having you around."

Luke clearly had no idea what to do with this information. His fine eyebrows knit together as he frowned at her. "Why?"

"Well, you're not a little bit clever and interesting, but that's not all there is to being friends. I just like your company. Isn't that enough?"

He turned to look back over the town and his face fell into shadow. Heavy silence seemed to blanket him.

Eventually feeling her gaze drawn back to the night sky by how truly extraordinary Sirius really did look on a flawlessly clear fall evening, she found herself stargazing. The wonder of mere existence was never lost on her when she looked up and saw the distant past looking back. Photons were life and death and knowledge, and Jane Foster saw the infinite quite clearly written across the the span of that visible-invisible quantum of light.

One might say that she looked upon a pinhead and saw angels dancing.

"You never look at the stars," she observed quietly some time later, a little surprised by the realisation.

Luke dropped two chunks of hardwood on the coals of the fire and the light level started to climb again, illuminating his pensive expression. Apparently troubled, he glanced up at the sky as if to confirm that they were where he'd left them.

"Astrophysics obviously isn't your passion. What is?"

There was an extensive pause. Luke looked hesitant and sheepish.

"A theory of everything," he said at length.

Jane giggled. "You don't do anything by half do you? That's awfully ambitious."

"Nonetheless. It is a contrary little secret of mine that my very dearest hope is to discover that the world makes sense."

*Not much chance of it, I'm terribly sorry to say,* she thought, smiling widely to herself.

He smiled faintly back, his hand slipping into his coat pocket while he dithered. "Jane, I should like... there is something I should like you to have."

Sitting up, she pulled herself closer. "I don't... what for?" He couldn't possibly have some other technological marvel up his sleeve so soon. She forbade it for the sake of her peace of mind.

He drew his hand out of his pocket again, something silver and shiny flashing in the firelight. As he held it out to her, balancing it by the edges between his fingertips and thumb, she saw that it was a few millimetre thick, palm-sized disk engraved with dozens of circles and inlaid with gold flourishes. She took it from him and rotated the outer rim of the disk, the inner circles and rete arm, touching the intricacies of the craftsmanship, appreciating the teeny scale of the precision work and the still functional quality of the whimsical design. The pointers were tiny swordsmen and bowmen.
"It's-" Luke was stuttering, taking her rapt silence for confusion.

She interrupted before he could start floundering. "It's an astrolabe. An inclinometer used since antiquity by astronomers and navigators. When I was a grad student, I had a professor who collected them. This is the most elaborate face I've ever seen in person."

"Yes," the word came out as a relieved sigh.

"It's beautiful." She looked down again, tilting it back and forth to catch the light, taken by it. Not understanding why he'd brought it, she tried to give it back.

Luke shook his head and pressed it into her hand. "It's yours to keep. A gift."

Jane gasped a little, enchanted and reluctant all at once. "For me? What's the occasion?"

His usually impeccable posture had finally broken down, his shoulders hunched and his face tucked in bashfully. His hair fell across his forehead and her fingers itched to brush it away. "I owe you, Jane. I do owe you."

She saw what this was. She saw a part of him so clearly now and for a moment it all made so much sense.

"Thank-you," she said with feeling, reaching over to put her hand on his shoulder, meeting his searching blue eyes with firmness and gratitude. "Thank-you so much, it's beautiful and thoughtful and I love it."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Jane was holding her breath, not knowing how to say what she felt she had to say.

"You know, you don't have to earn your keep to be welcome here. You don't have to mark a tally. I'm not keeping score. Where did you get this?" She held up the astrolabe.

His voice was reedy with hesitation, "I made it for you."

She swallowed questions and emotions and stayed in the moment. "It's wonderful. I'll cherish it. Don't bribe me, Luke. You don't need to."

His jaw worked, but she leaned in and slid her hand down his back, pressing her face into the hollow between his throat and shoulder as she hugged him tightly. He was warm and smelled like rain, but he was so tense. She squeezed once and released him.

"You don't need to."
It ended up taking more like a few weeks for them to get their collective act together and drag themselves away from various design ideas and their inexpert infighting about particle physics (none of them really knew what they were talking about in that field, so everyone ended up yelling). Jane was also nursing a new nuance in her theory about the formation of naturally occurring wormholes and gravitation between celestial bodies, which had engaged Erik's enthusiasm and had caused Luke to scoff openly at them both. He'd said they were barking up entirely the wrong tree- that Jane ought to realise that by now- and drawn something incomprehensible on the whiteboard with what looked like a Celtic knot beside it. Seeing their blank faces, he'd written 'exotic matter' in scare quotes and walked away in a dismissive huff. Unsurprisingly, no sudden light of understanding had dawned from this performance.

The day they managed to leave, which happened to be the morning after Halloween, Jane called ahead to warn Darcy they were on their way and received a mumbled lecture to the effect that Darcy would be unable to involve herself in anything unless they stayed in the city for a few days. She was, in her own words, 'decimated' by her recreational activities the night before. Jane made an executive decision to put up Team Science in a hotel on SHIELD's dime instead of trying to get Highlands University to extend the questionable hospitality of its spare dorms.

Erik found the three hour car ride borderline excruciating, mostly because Jane and Luke had taken up recreational bickering in order to keep their enormous brains occupied during the trip.

"No, seriously, try it. Your mouth will love you forever."

Luke curled his lip as if she were shoving garbage in his face instead of a hot dog. "I would sooner starve. In what possible semantic accident could a term like 'street meat' come to refer to anything one would wish to put in one's mouth?"

Jane took a huge bite and visibly relished every chew. She swallowed and grinned good-naturedly. "I guess it isn't the most appetising image ever, and yet it works so well. That's how you coin a phrase. Darcy would say this hot dog is 'the shit' and you'd think she'd be agreeing with you, but just the opposite. She appreciates fine cuisine and colourful metaphor."

"How tragic you are in my company and not hers. It must be so odious."

"So very." Jane nudged him gently with her elbow, her petite silhouette practically disappearing into his as she pretended to dig him in the ribs and he caught her lightly around the shoulders, immobilising her against his side. Luke cracked a tiny, uncertain smile as she giggled and pushed away from him with a hand on his chest.

"If you two would be so kind," Erik groused, hauling himself up into the driver's seat. He and Jane were taking turns manning the wheel, but it had been a long time since he'd driven regularly and he was already tired of it halfway into his shift. Their constant chattering was not helping. He saw where this was all headed.

Jane was riding shotgun, spreading out the remains of her lunch on her lap and fiddling with all the air vents so they weren't aimed directly at her. She had some notes laid out beside her on the seat and, between the generous cabin of the van and her narrow bottom, there was plenty of extra room for sketches and calculations. Erik knew it was only a matter of time before she dripped mustard on something important and squawked for a paper towel, but he held his tongue. There was no point whatsoever trying to stop it, she'd wave away any and all worries until the thing came to pass. She
was always so confident her luck would hold.

Luke was folded uncomfortably on the jump seat in the back, forced to lean forward and hunch so he could see them. Erik felt his pain, having been relegated to sit there on almost every previous occasion he'd ridden in this blasted research tank. It was borderline impossible to feel like part of the conversation back there, but Jane was babbling to him over her shoulder and completely ignoring Erik anyway, so he could hardly feel left out even if there were a snowball's chance in Hell he ever would. Luke had not struck Erik as the biggest social butterfly. The kid did have a quick tongue, he'd give him that; Erik had nearly bust something laughing at his deadpan 'joy' upon being told he'd be in the back the whole way.

"We have the potential energy now, as soon as we have enough antimatter and we finish building the containment-converter thing- like, we are there," Jane summed up, ever-so-subtly changing the subject back to work. She'd said as much several times over the last month, but she never sounded any less awed by it. "The next thing is really the exotic matter to hold the bridge open. Negative gravity. It's theoretical that it exists, but obviously something like it does because the bridge we saw was stable and huge. Supposedly, armies could be moved with it." Jane tended to look up when she was thinking, her eyes travelling over the ceiling of the van like there was some incredibly interesting series of equations written up there. She scrunched her face up as she finished, some thought half-formed, then turned to Luke expectantly. Like she just knew he'd guess what she was thinking.

In Jane's defence, it seemed he did. He smirked at her like the spider to the fly, a wicked glint of self-satisfied recognition in his eyes. "Exotic matter is nothing, inaptly named: it is as common as dust. You should be wondering how to connect departure point and destination, Dr. Foster."

She shook her head at him, as if he were just an incorrigible child hiding a secret stockpile of candy and not a shifty adult claiming arcane knowledge of the composition of the universe.

"And this is where the realness of consciousness and Uncertainty collide and make magic, is it?" Jane was amused but also enthralled, her honey brown eyes gleaming like gold with excitement. She had that 'I want the cookie and I have a plan to make it mine' look which had never preceded anything good in Erik's experience.

"The exact place, Jane," Luke said, equally thrilled and leaning close to her. "And two points in space-time are momentarily one."

They were all going mental. Erik gripped the steering wheel and tried not to grind his teeth.

"Where do you go to shop for controlled industrial substances?"

"Anywhere you want when Nick Fury vouches for you."

"I begin to understand why you were both so certain I must work for this organisation."

"It's kinda the safer assumption. They're pretty thorough."

Jane left Erik at a not-too-fancy restaurant to secure a table, then drove a few blocks to venture into the University's campus bar and retrieve her wayward intern. Darcy was sufficiently recovered to be out again only two days after her decimation. The bar was in full swing with an After-Halloween costume party, advertised on the posters that covered every available wall as a pre-emptive consolation to prevent post-holiday blues. Jane thought that would logically lead to an infinite
recursion of holiday and post-holiday parties, but that was probably the idea. She couldn't say she understood the appeal of the event herself, the deafening thumping of electronic music, flashing lights, and the sweaty press of bodies was already making her claustrophobic. The one thing she'd never liked about any club or concert or dance she'd ever been to, no matter what kind, was how staggeringly loud it always was. She was hoping to still be able to hear when she turned forty.

Luke, who was probably not someone she should have brought with her into this situation now that she thought about it, was at least easily visible in the throng and unlikely to get lost. She'd sent him to one side of the room while she searched the other, Darcy having said something about meeting her at the edge. The edge of what had been unspecified, but she hoped it meant near a wall where the crowd was thinner.

Just as she was quietly beginning to panic, utterly surrounded and being constantly jostled, a hand seized her arm and yanked her around into a small circle of people. Darcy's pink streaks glowed under the black lights that lined the bar and her teeth looked preternaturally white against her dark lipstick as she smiled. "Hey, boss!" she shouted over the music, hugging Jane briefly and pushing her glasses back up her nose as she pulled away.

Jane was opening her mouth to suggest they get out of the noise when Luke suddenly materialised in her line of sight, cutting easily through the fray towards them. He tried to stop just behind Darcy, but the press of people herded him in so close that he brushed against her and Jane managed to interject, "Darcy, you remember Luke," just as Darcy turned around to investigate and ended up nose to chest with him.

"Oh shit," she said, surprised, stepping back so she could see his face and give him a little wave. "I mean, hi! Sorry! I forgot you were like eight feet tall."

"Miss Lewis," Luke acknowledged, his distantly polite tone strained by the need to shout. "Jane, I will sample every kind of meat vended on every street corner of this city if we leave immediately."

Jane hid a smile. "You don't like dubstep, huh?"

"If that is what this sound is called, then no, I do not."

"What's wrong with it?" Darcy wanted to know, clearly amused.

"It is entirely loathsome, Miss Lewis. I apologise if I have insulted you personally by saying so."

Darcy shook her head. "Nah, it's got a beat. That's all I'm looking for." She grinned again.

Jane grabbed Luke's hand as he made a beeline for the exit and reached back for Darcy's as well so she wouldn't lose either of them. Their short human chain threaded through dancers and minglers to the door, people getting out of Luke's way sometimes without even looking at him. Darcy pulled away as they gained the street, rushing over to kick the van's tires. Jane had abandoned it right in front of the entrance, just in case she needed an ironclad excuse to get out of the party the very instant she found Darcy.

"Man, this thing! I had nightmares about dying in this thing and never being found. Mummified with all your computers and stuff as my tomb treasures. You've scarred my psyche, Jane." She started to walk around it and glanced back at them. "Where are we going? Can I drive?"

Luke's fingers squeezed hers and Jane took that as him registering his protest. She barely kept her laughter in, both because he seemed nervous of Darcy and because he was afraid of the wrong driver. If anyone was a danger behind that wheel, it was Jane. "I think it'd be better if I did, actually." What
he didn't know probably wouldn't hurt him.

"Spoilsport," Darcy complained, levelling a mischievous gaze at Luke. "Does she let you drive it?"

He looked at Jane and then back at Darcy. "Me?"

"Usually she fobs it off on anyone who gets close enough to be construed as willing. It's boring having to watch the road and stuff, you know. Jane's brain-the-size-of-a-planet gets restless." Darcy flipped the hood up on her sweater and hugged herself, going for her cute and innocent look. It worked only on people who didn't know her. Jane's stomach filled with dread. "That's how come she keeps-"


"What was she going to say?" he leaned down to ask to her as they moved toward the van, and her face flamed.

"Nothing, she's just bugging me. Come on."

Darcy started whistling.

Darcy sipped her wine and settled back into the pillow lounge she'd made, mad pleased with herself. "Some day I'll just live in a hotel. Never clean up after myself, room service, queen beds for everyone, and more pillows than you could ever use. It's definitely the way to live."

Jane smiled a little, looking down as she poured herself another glass. Darcy wondered if Jane knew it was exactly the right angle for her, her incredibly thick eyelashes fanning just so and her sweet, heart-shaped face looking especially soft and pretty. So much havoc could be wreaked with these gifts, and Jane just wasn't at all interested in wreaking it. She always refused to be Darcy's wingman, even when Darcy promised to love her and make her coffee forever. A waste was what it was.

"Do you think you could convince SHIELD it's totally necessary that I stay here while I'm in school? Like, tell them I'm doing vital... something or other for your research? I will so pay you back when I'm President."

"I think they might catch on after the first month or so. Sorry, Madame President." Jane settled on the other bed. "I thought you liked dorms."

"I do, but there's no hot tub and I have to wash my own sheets."

"We've all got our burdens to bear." Jane took a drink, but she was staring out the window with that dreamy look that meant she was thinking of something else. Inevitably, it was probably something sciencey and beyond the ken of mere interns.

"So, you can't stop bantering back and forth, and you finish each other's science sentences," Darcy observed nonchalantly, as if it weren't a complete non sequitur, hoping Jane would bite and come back down to Earth where she would be ripe for teasing and torture. She liked to keep the boss reminded that she wasn't immune to life's little trivialities.

"I don't know what that's supposed to imply, but if you're asking if the project is going well, then the project is going incredibly, unbelievably well." Jane rolled over and propped up the stem of her wineglass between the folds of the duvet. Darcy saw that ending in tears, but it was a hotel. Hotels were for living dangerously. With red wine and white fabric. Although if there were a time for living
without red wine, Darcy didn't want to know about it.

"Right, so you're not touching more and more and he totally doesn't obviously relax when you talk to him. I see that."

"I think you're just desperate to pair me up." Jane pointed accusingly, her usually wide-open expression giving way to narrow-eyed distrust.

Well, hook line and sinker, Darcy congratulated herself.

"The moment he showed up on the scene, you were already planning our wedding, just because," Jane complained.

That wasn't technically a completely inaccurate summary, if Darcy was being honest, though she had been mostly kidding at the time. Still. "But you don't think of him that way."

"No."

"Which is why we've been talking about this for like two entire minutes, and I've never once mentioned any names, yet you still instantly knew exactly who I meant. Because he is not on your mind at all."

Jane threw her head back and tossed an arm across her eyes with a prodigious sigh. "Come on, Darcy. Please."

"I know," Darcy said and smiled evilly into her wineglass, "I'm not being fair. It's all that sexy, sexy smarts that you're really after. Jane the science monk."

She threw a pillow. "Don't do that! Don't make me into some killjoy stick-in-the-mud. I had a long-term boyfriend when I first came out here and we broke up. I'm allowed to need some time A, and B, as hard as it is for people to believe for whatever reason, I hate casual dating and trolling and all that. I'm not against having a relationship, I just haven't got the patience to go out looking or go through all the crap you have to go through to actually get to know someone when you're both aware you're supposed to be moving towards some kind of decision about Your Lives Together. I'd rather focus on my own life and my research and let it happen if it happens. If it doesn't, so what! Anyway, I am not some cold fish. I am completely not denying that Luke is extremely attractive and I'm so not pretending that I haven't noticed. I have definitely noticed."

"Not just his brain?" she teased, not letting it go because it was way too funny when Jane got all outraged.

"Oh my God, you haven't seen him in a t-shirt with his hair messed up. You don't even know."

It was nice to know that even Jane could still take a second to be totally shallow and ridiculous. Darcy hadn't seen her giggle over anything since Thor had kissed her hand like some kind of courtly knight and it just wasn't right. She understood devotion and passionate dedication to a goal, but you always need some goofiness in your life- not even man-related goofiness: any kind at all. It was only practical, otherwise you end up with crazy eyes and an intern who has no business working for you as your only companion.

"But you like him," Darcy found herself repeating, because it genuinely struck her as something notable. Jane was so focussed, her curiosity about people tended to burn out when she got what she wanted from them, but it went beyond the intrigue with this guy. It wasn't just calamity-of-curiosity Jane talking. It wasn't just Jane's general amiability with pretty much anyone who didn't antagonise her, either. "I mean, really like him. Kidding aside, you were like... protective of him. At dinner. Is
"Rebound? What, from Thor? Darcy, he was pretty memorable, but I barely knew him. No." Jane's eyes glazed over as she thought about it. There were clearly a lot of feelings tied up in the whole shebang. Darcy figured the feelings were about what Thor represented as much as about him as a (hunky) person, that was always her personal theory about why Jane found it so hard to get over. "But I guess I do feel a bit protective of Luke. He's so... I don't know. Lost."

"And the unspeakable brilliance and towering hotness are just extra."

"He'd still be interesting without either. He's proud and he's demanding, but he's also weirdly sweet and kind of shy. Sometimes he can be playful, but it's like there's this shadow hanging over him. I want to know what happened to him—something obviously happened to him. I want to figure him out, and I think he... needs that. From someone. For someone to try."

Darcy wasn't one for projects like that. She didn't have a lot of patience for people who were difficult, usually she was instantly connected and total bosom companions with someone or it wasn't going to happen at all. Jane was one of the few exceptions, in that it hadn't seemed like they would get along the best for a while there, but Jane was pretty endearing when you got used to her. "It sounds like that could take some time."

"I am okay with that," Jane said breezily, clearly not realising how it came off.

"You sure you're not going stir crazy out there by yourself all the time? I worry about you, you know. I feel like Erik is going to call me sometime and be like, 'Jane keeled over after trying to live on instant coffee and hot pockets for too long and she was eaten by giant desert rats. Unpack your suitcase, you're never touring the Milky Way'."

Jane merely raised her eyebrows. "I'm not lonely. Why does everyone think I'm just so lonely?"

Darcy pushed a hank of hair behind her ear and adjusted her glasses. "I probably shouldn't say this, but Jane, you have no friends. We're not the two most compatible people ever, but I know you more than a bit and you're actually super cool and you're independent but you're not really a loner. I guess I just want to make sure you're okay with how it is." Especially so that if you do get with this guy, or don't, it'll be for the right reasons. I am looking out for your absent-minded genius ass. Least I can do.

"That's very sweet, Darcy." She smiled that glamorous smile she had, all teeth and sparkle, to show she wasn't offended. "I'm fine with my choices. It's hard sometimes, but it's worth it."

"Did you, like, just have this same conversation? Or do you rehearse?"

Jane laughed, shaking her head. "People have been asking. I didn't realise my lack of interest in Puente Antiguo's thriving social scene was going to be such a point of concern."

Darcy threw the pillow back at her.
They were forming something like a human jenga tower in the middle of the lab roof. Erik stood holding three small pieces of quinary alloy in place over the enormous, dense metal nozzle that Luke had to crouch slightly to hover over the electromagnetic vacuum chamber to which Jane was trying to attach it using extremely unsafe welding practises. She was also trying to talk with a spare filler rod in her mouth.

"The quantum of energy should be released instantaneously when the-" she babbled, probably incomprehensibly.

"Do you know what this stuff weighs?" Erik ground out between his teeth, sweat beading on his brow.

"Please be cautious with that torch, Jane." Luke's voice sounded a hell of a lot more bored than concerned. "I'm sure everyone would prefer this venture ended with all limbs and digits intact."

Jane could see only his legs and waist from this angle, but she could hear his sardonic expression in his tone, could sense how unruffled he was by all the goings on and the supporting of very heavy materials in awkward, delicate positions. Bastard.

"I'd watch it, if I were you, sunshine," she commented cheerfully, knowing that if he looked down he'd see the reflection of the blue flame playing across a particularly personal area of his trousers.

"I don't find that insinuation amusing."

"It wasn't meant to be."

Erik's grunt was high-pitched with strain. "Both of you stop talking or I'm going to drop this on your heads."

Jane reapplied herself to welding, trying to use her nose to adjust her goggles by repeatedly scrunching up her face.

Absorbed in practicalities, she had almost lost sight of what she was really doing; the engine she was building and the pure energy it would spew into the sky on her command. They had not yet devised a method for controlling the energy after release or making it do what they wanted, but the very fact that they were building something which could plausibly end up a functional wormhole-maker was messing with her mind. She was elated, terrified, and half-convinced she was dreaming.

She tried to focus, but her mind ran back over their last night with Darcy in the city, still dwelling on less potent catastrophes than imminent intra-dimensional travel.

"Do you losers even realise you're in Vegas right now? Like, did you know this isn't just Darcy's college town, this is the Mecca of bad decisions?" Darcy sprawled in the hotel chair, her posture exaggeratedly bored. She started winding a lock of her hair around her fingers, frowning at the ceiling.

Jane massaged her temples and tried to come up with a few excuses before the inevitable pressure to join in on some ill-advised escapade started in earnest. "I was aware."

"Don't you want to take Africa-boy out on the Strip?" Darcy asked, as if she were concerned for his experiences as a visitor to the country, a naïve pastoral type missing out on the wonders of
civilisation. It was the most ridiculous attempt at a guilt trip Jane had ever seen.

"He's not sheltered, he's been all over the world." She glared meaningfully at her friend. Anticipating an objection, she added, "It's just regular-old middle class America that he isn't used to."

"What's more American than Vegas?"

"Apple pie," Jane said, folding clothes into her suitcase. "You know I hate casinos, they're so skeevy, and I don't really get the point. Unless you're actually serious about gambling, it's just a fast and boring way to get rid of all your spending money."

"You only played slots, it's your fault you were bored."

"I get enough thrills in my life without losing money I don't have at a craps table. And I'm not just saying this, but I really don't think he'd be into it." Actually, Jane thought, the tricky thing was that he might be. She had a terrible foreboding feeling that he would enjoy poker way, way too much and that he would probably cheat at everything else. She doubted he would understand why counting cards wasn't fair strategy, for much the same reason he didn't understand why it was a big deal that he'd picked up a near-doctoral fluency in physics over a few weeks.

Darcy looked sceptical, but didn't argue. She turned back to looking out the hotel room window, enjoying Jane's choice view of the parking lot. "Did you guys tell SHIELD you were coming up for a while?"

Jane jumped up and raced to the window, looking for black vans and swarms of men in suits. "No, are they stalking us?"

"Nice paranoia, boss." Darcy sounded genuinely proud. "I don't know, but this dude in the sunglasses has been sitting there in the parking lot every time I've looked. This is what, the fourth day you're here? Was he there the first day?"

She hadn't noticed. She hadn't even thought about it.


Jane shuddered to think. She knew they had to be curious and probably full of suspicion, but since no one had forced the issue, she had sort of forgotten about it. There were so many more pressing things on her mind.

"You don't think they'd, like, lock him up and try to study him if they find out he's an alien or a transgenic or whatever he is, do you?"

"Thor said they seemed prepared to torture him. I mean, he definitely felt like they were threatening it the way he told me the story, but he didn't seem to think it was a big deal. I kind of dismissed it because he was so blasé, I thought maybe he was posturing a bit." Jane toyed with her cuffs and tried not to board a train of thought that wouldn't take her anywhere good. The train of thought which went down the track that it was unlikely someone as sure of himself as Thor was would exaggerate to impress her, that his culture seemed to be some kind of knights and swords throwback thing and he really wouldn't think it was a big deal.

"Thor did break into their super-secret base."

Luke goes around casually bending the laws of physics, she didn't say. "That guy could be anyone, let's not go looking for a conspiracy until we have to."
Darcy gave her an inscrutable look and then shrugged. Jane had a feeling that her intern knew better than to believe that Jane was really putting this out of her mind.

"Can we at least go get a drink, then?"

Darcy led the charge down the sidewalk, excited to show them around a favourite hang-out of hers called The High Horse, Erik morosely tailing her muttering about how they were all becoming alcoholics, and Jane bringing up the rear with Luke at her side. He walked more slowly than usual, allowing her shorter legs to keep pace even in the high-heeled boots which Darcy had insisted she borrow. Jane didn't mind heels, but she didn't have a lot of occasion to wear them and these were one or two sizes too big, so walking in them wasn't exactly effortless. She was, in point of fact, bleakly certain that she'd end up eating pavement at least once before the evening was out.

She teetered even as she thought it, and Luke took her arm. He pretended not to notice when she looked up at him in surprise. She swallowed any comment and went with her tried and true conversation starter.

"So when we get back and get this little antimatter reactor of ours put together," provided it works and doesn't kill us all she added in her head, curving her hand around his wrist reflexively, "What's the next step?"

"You must open the path of uncertainty," he managed to say it as though it didn't sound like ridiculous pseudo-mystical bullshit.

"A wormhole, you mean. With exotic matter."

Luke shot her an annoyed look, a wrinkle of exasperation appearing in his forehead at her dogged emphasis on terminology. "Yes, if you insist."

Erik, who had been glancing back periodically as though he suspected them of plotting against him, threw in, "And exotic matter comes from where, again?"

"It's everywhere," Luke snapped, like this should be obvious. "It's really not a question of where it comes from."

He'd said as much on a few occasions, but had never been much inclined to try to explain what he meant. Jane found herself thinking very abstractly indeed as she tried again to work it out, unconsciously drawing circles on the back of his hand with her index finger and slowing their walk until the gap between them and their companions had widened considerably. She looked up at him again, curious about his mood. He seemed tired today, or maybe impatient.

"How do you feel now that we're getting close?" she finally asked, remembering that he'd avoided the question of whether he wanted to try to use the bridge when it was built.

His arm stiffened nearly imperceptibly, but he gave no other sign of discomfort. "I feel anticipation, among other things. Why?"

"I don't know what's going to happen if it works. The possibility is very real that I could cross it into a whole other world." She avoided voicing her fears about what kind of place Asgard would turn out to be and her doubts about the safety of Earth in the face of a patently superior power. She was barely even aware of her simmering existential terror about what her role and legacy would end up being in the fields of science and philosophy if she managed to walk across the stars and come back. He probably knew all of it from one look at her face, he was insufferable like that.
Luke leaned down towards her, linking their arms at the elbow now so he could pull her close and speak very softly, "Jane, when... Your 'traveller', what was... that is to say, how did you find him?"

Surprised, she met his eyes and saw a sort of pained reluctance there. He had been so uncharacteristically disinterested in the details about Thor, even though she had said very little of substance when she told him about it, and this sudden change kicked up her storm of unanswered questions all over again. She pushed it all aside for the time being, wanting to know where he was going with this. "You know, it's very weird, he could have been anyone... Well, not anyone: he kind of looked like a wrestler, like really big and fit. But he seemed completely human."

There was a twitch in his cheek, his face otherwise impassive. He seemed to be struggling with how to phrase his next question, eager and hesitant at the same time. She clearly hadn't told him what he wanted to know.

Trying to spare him, she went on unprompted, "He was disoriented when we first found him, you know, babbling and yelling, but he spoke perfect English and he was lucid. I mean, in retrospect I realise he was totally lucid; at the time we thought he was loony tunes."

"He was not injured?"

"No." She didn't mention that he had remained apparently uninjured even though she'd run him over, and Darcy had put a couple thousand volts through him.

He made a low noise in his throat and frowned at the sidewalk. "But how did you... how did you find him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you guys coming or what?" Darcy's voice broke through their bubble of distraction right as Luke opened his mouth to explain. Or maybe not to explain, knowing him. He closed it again and smiled grimly at her, shaking his head.

Not taking her eyes off him, she called back, "Yeah, yeah."

It hadn't taken long, after the first round of cocktails, for Darcy to get bored and head to the dance floor. She'd tried to drag Jane with her ("No. Did you ever see that episode of Seinfeld about Elaine's 'full-body dry heave'? Yeah. No."), then Luke ("I think not, Miss Lewis.") and finally Erik ("I'd look like Methuselah out there.") before giving up on them all. Erik secured another round and crossed his arms, measuring them with his eyes.

"We're going to have half a prototype when we get back, what do you think of that?"

Jane shook her head, Luke said, "I think it would seem we are progressing nicely."

"How closely do you suppose SHIELD is monitoring that expense account?" Jane changed the subject, more troubled than she wanted to be by Darcy's reminder that she wasn't exactly working for the most transparent of government agencies. It wasn't like she didn't know, but they had been so good about leaving her alone so far that she had allowed herself to become complacent.

Erik tapped the table thoughtfully. "Very, I'm sure."

"Did they quiz you about Luke that first week when you went in for the meeting?" Jane glanced over at the man himself, but he was closed off in his own little world. Worrying his thumbnail. "I
assumed they would at the time, but they never contacted me about security concerns or anything."

There was a moment of silence.

"How closely are they watching us?"

Erik shook his head, his mouth set in a thin line. "I don't know, Jane, they have a good faith agreement with an alien power not to harass you, but how far that will go when there's no sign of further contact..."

It had occurred to her more than once that they might be bugging her lab, but she kept such a level of electronic noise going that she always figured they wouldn't be able to hear anything no matter how good they thought their equipment was. She sipped her drink and counted to ten. "Did they quiz you?"

"I didn't know anything about him and they eventually lost interest when I said he was just a gawker. Sorry, Luke."


"Doesn't it bother you, knowing they'll try to dig through your whole life?" Jane would have expected some bigger reaction from him given how intensely guarded he always was. His life was not exactly an open book.

He shook his head. "There is nothing nefarious for them to find. They are only wasting their time." He grinned, perhaps pleased with the thought.

Jane wondered.

The time came to leave and Jane sent both Erik and Luke outside to wait while she headed into the fray to grab Darcy, who had been bouncing back and forth into and out of their discussions at the table with the suddenness and violence of a ping pong ball. Which was also an apt metaphor for her performance on the dance floor.

"Come on," Jane shouted into her friend's ear, "we're going!"

Darcy pouted only for a second before laughing at Jane's hard-done-by expression. "Fine! Gotta hit the ladies' first!"

The washroom was one of those borderline-spa affairs that nice lounges sometimes have. There were little couches and sugar rubs and fine soaps. Jane was washing her hands when Darcy sidled up beside her to reapply her lipstick.

"Have any fun at all?"

She sighed dramatically, shooting her intern a small pre-emptive glare in the mirror. "A bit. Don't say I told you so, it's annoying."

Darcy rolled her eyes. "Because I've ever cared about coming off annoying. Also, I told you so."

"I like going out, I just prefer a nice dinner and a glass of wine to a dance club and college boys trying to bump and grind with me." She smoothed her hair and smiled at her reflection, a habit she'd developed way back in high school. She couldn't remember if it had been some self-esteem
technique or just a way to check her teeth for spinach.

"Probably do you good if you let them."

"Shut up." She flicked water and Darcy dodged, laughing.

Darcy was still giggling as they were leaving the lounge. She threw herself against the street door, leaning on the handle to hold it open as she turned back to say something, but Jane held up a hand to shush her as she passed through and caught a glimpse of what was unfolding further down the sidewalk. Luke and Erik, who had been waiting for them at the corner, were being accosted by some drunks. Three of them, and all of them intent on something. Judging by their clothes, they were maybe businessmen on the way back to their hotel after a well-lubricated dinner meeting. They'd formed an aggressive pyramid with the biggest guy at point, flanked by the others on either side, their postures hostile.

"I asked you what the fuck you said to me!" the point man, who had a build like a sack of bricks, drew himself up to shout in Luke's face. His voice carried, and Jane grabbed nervously at Darcy's arm as she walked slowly closer. If someone called the police, this could all get extremely ugly. She'd probably spend the rest of her life in some SHIELD bunker.

Looking down his nose at all three of them with a distant contempt, Luke put his hands in his pockets in an air of total unconcern. "I said a man of honour would beg pardon. Only a coward and an oaf attacks an elder for his own clumsiness."

Erik- standing just behind Luke- shifted his weight nervously, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Jane figured Luke must be talking about him, he being the only person present who could reasonably be called 'an elder'. The drunk must have bumped into Erik, tripped over him or near him, and gotten belligerent about whose fault it was.

"Who's a coward? Who are you calling coward, pretty boy?" Sack of Bricks slurring got worse the more pissed off he got, spittle flying everywhere as he yelled louder and louder.

Luke leaned forward to pin the man with an icy stare. "You, you drunken buffoon."

Jane started running towards them to intervene before she had a clue what she could possibly do when she got there, but she had taken only a few steps when the drunk reeled back to strike out with a very vicious-looking right hook, throwing his whole body into it. She froze, covering her mouth in horror and anticipating the sickening sound of the blow landing- but it didn't come. Luke reached up and caught the man's fist against his palm halfway through its arc towards his face. The drunk's punch stopped dead, as suddenly as if he'd hit a concrete wall. He made a strange, strangled noise of shock or pain as his arm quivered from the impact.

"I wouldn't try that again," Luke said conversationally. His grip on the man's fist tightened until Sack of Bricks' knees buckled slightly and his eyes started watering. "Now, apologise to your elder."

Bricks blinked away the tears from his eyes and turned to find Erik with his unfocused gaze. "Sorry, guy."

"Oh, clearly you are a man of breeding," Luke's caustic mutter betrayed a new height of irritation. "Assuming you aren't actually capable of better, which I am forced to do based on the testimony of our entire brief acquaintance, I suppose that will have to suffice."

"It's no prob... we don't-" Erik tried to diffuse the situation, obviously a little shell shocked by the turn of events. He'd probably expected a brawl.
Luke silenced him with a look. "We have concluded our business, Dr. Selvig, not to worry. I shan't keep the gentlemen any longer. I'm sure their engagement must be quite pressing." He dropped Bricks' hand, and the drunk sagged so badly that Jane was sure he was going to collapse on the pavement. He managed to gather himself up at the last minute and staggered away clutching his fist. His companions followed him, wide-eyed and blinking stupidly.

She ran the rest of the way over and drew up short in front of Luke, who turned to meet her gaze placidly.

"I hope you didn't break his hand," she said abruptly.

Luke shrugged. "I attempted to avoid it, but precision isn't always possible in such things."

Jane realised she was still clutching at her assistant only when Darcy pulled free of her grasp.

"Are you okay, Erik?" Darcy put her hand on his arm.

"Fine, fine. He just knocked the wind out of me. He was walking with one eye closed, if you know what I mean. The booze told him I was picking a fight. Can't claim I've never been on the other side of that conversation." He rubbed his side and winced. "Solid guy, though, our friend."


"Is that enough fun for the evening?" Luke asked the world in general, making the word 'fun' incredibly ironic. "Shall we adjourn to the hotel?"

Erik ignored the grousing and clapped him heartily on the back, startling him. "Sure we'll adjourn. Thanks a lot, kid. I don't think I would have been able to talk myself out of that."

Luke, apparently slightly frazzled by the gesture, busied himself smoothing his lapels and cleared his throat. "You seemed prepared to try."

"Well, my boxing days are a ways behind me." Erik's mouth tugged up on one side in a wry grin. "Had to try something."

Jane chewed her lip, a sense of unease settling in her stomach. She couldn't put her finger on what was bothering her, but it was more than just the scene. "Can we all stay out of trouble on the walk back or should I call a cab?"

"Growing timid, Dr. Foster?" Luke said silkily, the rich timbre of his voice making capitulation sound very appealing.

"You know me better than that," she deflected airily, taking his arm again with greater insouciance than she felt and starting to lead the way back towards the hotel.

"I suppose so," he murmured.

Darcy clattered up beside them on her impractical shoes. "Jane, if I stay in your room tonight, do I have to get up when you check out?"
Kiss

The thing, the bridge-maker, was secure, in one piece, on the roof of the lab. The steel struts which bolted it down made it look like a giant, squat spider, crouching at the ready. The feeling Jane had gotten looking at it was much like the feeling of drinking too much champagne on an empty stomach.

They retired inside for the evening and Erik had cooked one of the half-dozen or so recipes he'd ever mastered, a nice Italian red sauce over pasta and veal, and left Jane's kitchen looking like a hurricane had gone through it. Very conveniently, he had to leave immediately after dinner to walk back to his apartment before it got too cold out. And Luke, though he sat on one of the vinyl chairs and watched her work without even pretending to be busy, did not offer to help clean up.

Jane's resentful muttering lasted only through washing the pots, soon replaced by humming. She could never hold much of a grudge.

"Erik Selvig should prepare your meals more often, Jane," Luke said matter-of-factly as she stacked the last few plates on the overcrowded drying rack. "You would be far more adequately fed."

"He has a very limited repertoire." She sniffed, allowing the words you smartass to remain implied. "Besides, under normal circumstances, he's hardly here all the time like this." She dried her hands and walked over to flop down into the chair nearest to his, turning to study him.

Luke sat there in a state of casual awareness, letting her watch him, his eyebrows slightly raised as if expectant but his gaze focussed on his own fingers where they toyed with the edge of his armrest. "You have a question," he said finally, prompting her. "As always."

Jane wasn't embarrassed or surprised that she was that easy to read. "What did you really want to know before, about the traveller?"

Staring into space, his fingers still fidgeting languidly, he seemed resigned rather than eager about resuming the conversation. "I wanted... I should like to know what you observed about his manner, his way of being?"

She guessed the question made sense- if she knew anyone with serious background in cultural anthropology, she'd be very tempted to tell them about Thor and get their thoughts. Still, she was bizarrely uncomfortable with going into too many specifics about him as a person, about what had happened while he was on Earth, and she could not shake the conviction that the topic was dangerous ground. "He was sort of, like, old-fashioned. I mean, like Dark Ages old-fashioned, mediaeval. He had these formal manners, but he was also really abrupt and demanding. Uncouth, I guess would be the word. Kind of oblivious, super confident. He seemed to think things would work the same as wherever he was from, which wasn't gonna happen. He did learn pretty fast, he picked up on things, but at first he wasn't interested in trying to fit in at all."

Luke digested all of this without giving her any hint as to how he felt about it or if it was the sort of information he was after. "He appeared to consider himself superior?"

"It was like a given. You know, granted his... race, or whatever, is obviously more advanced than us in some ways, but you can always learn something from a society that's completely different to yours. And he thought people should still be riding horses, which- what? Mostly he seemed to find our culture totally irrelevant until..."
"Until?" he looked at her at last, something fierce in his eyes.

"Something happened. I don't know what, he didn't exactly explain much to me. All I know is: he tried to get my stuff back from SHIELD's base in the desert and something went down. They captured him, locked him up for a while until Erik sprang him, and he was different after that. His ego took a massive hit in there. I guess he found out he wasn't as invincible as he thought, since they stopped him in his tracks. He was pretty convinced that he could just walk in there and take whatever he wanted, but he couldn't, and it made him try to live like the rest of us mere mortals. Rules and all. He was way easier to get along with after that."

Luke just nodded, there was a tightness around his mouth.

"He thought he wouldn't be able to go back," Jane added, remembering the quietness of that morning. Thor helping her with breakfast, chastened somehow, warm and cautiously optimistic. He had been so sweet, so accepting. She couldn't imagine being that calm at the idea of never going back to absolutely everything she had ever known, losing her life's work, nothing she had ever done mattering, her whole identity having to change. It had made her a little wary of him, that sudden equilibrium. She was waiting for the hammer to fall. So to speak.

"Yet he did."

"Yeah," she agreed, peering at Luke and trying to figure out his disinterested, melancholic posture. "Why didn't you ask me about him before? I mean, I was pretty evasive when I first told you about it and if it were me hearing that, there was a whole lot I would have questioned."

He rubbed at the exposed skin of his neck above his open collar, his eyes rolling upwards. "Because I am capable of patience."

"And I'm not?"

He stared at her impassively, leaning on his elbow.

"I'm giving you all kinds of time to tell me the truth," she protested, annoyed. "And it's not like it's not eating at me- it is gnawing at me- but I wait because I said I would. So just... you just keep your judgemental eyebrows to yourself and thank your lucky stars I'm not half as brusque as you're making me out to be."

"Pestering me incessantly is hardly leaving it well alone, Jane." Condescension practically radiated off of him.

"Hey. No. I've been really good about it. Not just for me, for anyone." And, as everyone I know is so fond of reminding me, you really haven't done anything to earn that, so don't make me regret it.

Luke rapped his knuckles against his armrest and looked out the window, chewing the inside of his cheek. He didn't seem to know how to respond to her anger. "I attempted to express gratitude."

"With stuff!" A dam of frustration broke inside her and she felt herself losing all control of what was coming out of her mouth, throwing up her hands in exasperation. "Didn't anyone ever teach you that everything isn't tit for tat? Just be-"

"No," he cut her off decisively, raising his voice. It was probably the most curtly he'd ever spoken to her, and it reverberated around the lab like a command. His eyes were flinty as he met her gaze. "No one ever did teach me that. Experience certainly hasn't."

Jane bit back the urge to throttle him and settled for frowning ferociously. "Why are you so
convinced that you're only worth what people can take from you?"

He sneered at her, but his hands were subtly shaking. "I warn you, Jane. I have finished indulging you."

"No, really," she pressed, leaning her forearms on her thighs and clasping her hands. "I'm trying to help you here. Why can't you be important just as a person?"

"Because that's not what I am," he snapped, as if this should be self-evident. His hand came up like a shield. "Don't speak. There is a limit to my endurance and you have reached it. Don't speak."

"Yeah right," she said sarcastically, but her heart was pounding.

"Then tell me how you did it!" he leapt to his feet, the chair clattering to the floor behind him. His voice seemed strangely amplified even though he was far from shouting, the harsh demand ringing unnaturally in her ears.

"Did what?" She sat back to look up at him, trying not to seem completely bewildered.

He scoffed at her, spreading his hands in a sweeping gesture. "How did you befriend your extraterrestrial traveller, Jane Foster? How did the alien become your personal guardian, how did you humble the star-walker? What could you have offered him, one lowly human scientist alone in the desert?"

This little speech, which had begun dripping with scorn and anger, dwindled to confusion and inexplicably- something approaching despair. Jane couldn't unravel it, her anxiety melting away in the wake of the puzzle, though the adrenaline rush kept her thoughts racing. Was he jealous? Had he tried to make contact before with his physics-bending technology and been unable to provoke any kind of response- hence now wanting her help? Or maybe he was a xenophobe who wanted to sever whatever link existed between Earth and Asgard, however tenuous it may be. He was an overreacher, she knew that was true with her soul, he sought out knowledge, he was thrilled with their progresses and their breakthroughs. It couldn't be that he was going to sabotage what they'd worked for. She'd stake her life on that.

"I found out he was inside the event so I followed him, even when I shouldn't have, and I helped him because he promised to tell me whatever I wanted to know if I did." She kept her tone matter-of-fact, watching him carefully. "Then I just... I guess I was just there for him. I told him about my work and he tried to explain his cosmology. Whatever happened between him and SHIELD really threw him for a loop, but after Erik got him out and we talked, I told him he could stay at the lab for as long as he needed to, since he figured he was stuck here forever. I felt kind of responsible for him. That was all, really."

He stalked closer, looming over her like some Gothic gargoyle. "You spoke to him of your science?"

"A bit."

"He was interested?"

"Sort of." Thor had been more charmed than interested, as if it were very endearing that the tenacious little human had managed to lightly brush the edges of what his people already fully understood. He'd been slightly proud of her, she'd thought, and it was both nice and condescending. She didn't particularly blame him, given the circumstances. He had the self-assurance of someone who knew just enough scientific theory to feel like the vastness of ignorance was being conquered and not enough to realise that the more science discovered, the more terrifyingly enormous that
vastness appeared. It was the confidence of the educated layman.

Luke grinned at that, something feverish about his expression, and clasped his hands behind his back. His sturdy stance emphasised the breadth of his shoulders and the fine musculature of his long limbs; it would have been intimidating if Jane were the least susceptible to that kind of debate body language.

"He didn't seem like a science type," she added with perfect honesty.

His real laugh, that distinctively light and musical laugh which she had so seldom heard even as he'd warmed up to her and started cracking what were undeniably jokes, shocked her out of her memories of Thor. Luke's eyes were downcast, but she could see a slight shine in them that confirmed his amusement was fond and genuine. Sensing her questioning look, he glanced up and smiled at her. "Jane, for a woman who continues to surprise me, you are so wonderfully predictable."

"Thanks?" The question came out sounding appropriately sardonic, but she was feeling a bit adrift.

"Then your bond of friendship was built on simple hospitality?" his tone was very tentative, but his posture had changed to a familiar one of only slight visible tension, and he sidled towards her like he always did when he was particularly interested in the bit of physics she was explaining. "Convenience and your curiosity?"

"More or less," Jane said. There'd been an attraction and a lot of adrenaline in there somewhere too, but more or less.

Luke tucked a hank of hair which had partially obscured his face behind his ear as he tilted his head to look sideways at her. "You command enormous loyalty from those who know you, Jane Foster. I wonder if you are fully cognizant of how great a power you possess."

She touched his hand, unable to resist making contact when it was dangling so close to her. "You know, the trick is that it goes both ways."

His teeth came together and she could see his Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallowed.

"Even aliens seem to be people, too, and people tend to give what they get." Maybe if she just held out a little longer, he'd break and tell her what this line of inquiry was really about, where it was really going. He always had a goal. She squeezed his fingers as they went slack in her grasp.

Suddenly his hand turned over in hers and he hauled her to her feet, only his iron grip preventing her from smashing her nose against his chest. "This generosity of yours is very hazardous. The traveller could have been the scout of a conquering army, and you aided him. If I am as Erik Selvig fears that I am, I have had you at my mercy a hundred times over and may be sparing you at present only for some further purpose."

She wanted to giggle at him. The difference between when he was trying really hard to show her how scary and dangerous he was and when he was legitimately losing his temper was becoming so stark and plain to her that it was almost ridiculous. "I think I'm a great judge of character. I was right about him, I was right about you, I was even on to who the most reasonable people to needle at SHIELD were. I haven't gambled and lost yet."

"You could still be very wrong to trust me, Jane." He was leaning down into her, close enough that she could feel the warmth of his breath.

"Nah," she said, smiling up at him ingenuously. "I don't think so."
He stared at her, slightly round-eyed, looking exposed and lost all over again. There was something so affecting about his eyes, something somehow innocent. His prickly moods and constant suspicions always had an uphill battle to wipe away that vulnerable, and strangely sweet quality in his face. She had a hunch he was at least semi-aware of this weakness and that it probably caused him a lot of grief. He'd certainly be a much better liar if his expressive features weren't always giving him away.

"You were nice to Darcy, you saved Erik, you put up with my circular ramblings and annoying questions for hours on end, bitching aside you still stay to eat with me, and you didn't have to do any of that. If you just wanted to ingratiate yourself, all you had to do was be professional and show me your stuff. You know it and I know it, so don't tell me any stories about dark motives for everything. You like me. I may not know what your thing is with the wormhole, but I know that you don't hate hanging out with us."

"Perhaps I don't," he said quickly, sounding discombobulated. "That doesn't mean I will not..."

"Whatever," she interrupted, "you're not going to betray me. You like picking my brain and teasing me too much."

His mouth shut and a faint blush dusted his fair skin. "Jane..."

"Your total inability to deny it is really precious."

He cleared his throat and stood up straight, looking down his nose at her with all the seriousness and haughtiness he could muster. "You wish to know how to direct the bridge?"

It was a real struggle in Jane whether to let him get away with this blatant diversion, but he certainly knew exactly which bait to use so that she would be unable to resist his change of subject. She could tell he wanted to turn away and put some space between them as well, but she still had hold of his hand. Using it as leverage, she pulled herself up onto the tips of her toes and kissed his cheek just above the jawbone, which was high as she could reach. "Of course I do." She turned and walked into the kitchen to get them some glasses of wine, ignoring his swift intake of breath. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

Flustered or shocked, she heard him clear his throat again before he managed to say anything. "I've spoken to you of will, have I not?"

"I guess." Jane sipped at the cheap Malbec she'd poured. It wasn't half bad for the money, not that she was much of a judge. She made a gesture towards the table with a second glass, and then put it down in front of the chair perpendicular to the one she would sit on. Curling one leg beneath her body as she sat down, she leaned against the back of the chair and blinked at him over her wine.

Luke eyed the set up warily, then stalked over with the dramatic, jungle cat walk which he didn't seem to realise that he had. He was such a bizarre combination of awkward and smoothly predatory; sometimes managing to seem almost small and shrinking, sometimes looking even bigger than he genuinely was. And he was certainly a big man, she thought, as he took his chair with theatrical casualness and stretched his long legs out in front of him. They reached clear to the other side of the table and would have completely invaded her space if she hadn't already folded herself to the side. That had to be on purpose. He smirked at her slightly, basically confirming it.

"What about will?" Jane prompted, casting a disapproving glance over his deliberately provocative pose.

"The power which defines all things is a triune power, made up of order, chaos, and will."
Now her eyes snapped back to him, trying to read his game plan on his expressive face. Something seemed familiar about this. "Okay," she said, waiting.

Her total acceptance and expectant attitude seemed to excite him. He sat up and leaned forward, using his hands to illustrate as he spoke, "The universe, Jane, is something like a mind. It is physical, it contains matter, and this matter explains itself very well up to a certain point, as in your Newtonian physics, of which you have had me read so much. The deterministic, 'Classical Physics' universe your people once thought they fully understood is like the material brain- but the subatomic, all quantum mechanics, is the inexplicable lightning that is life. Probabilistic waveforms exist simultaneously and paradoxically with particle behaviour. Superposition and perspective make mock of the orderly Newtonian world. This is like consciousness. Neither the material nor the immaterial is the mind. They are both the mind. Now! To effect one's will on the universe is simply to acknowledge and comprehend that one's will exists. Your mind has downward causal efficacy because your mind is no more merely a brain than a proton is a single particle which can only be in one place at a time.

"To open the bridge," he said, parting his hands slowly, the fluidness of the gesture mildly hypnotising, "you drive the wedge of your will through the uncertainty of a quantum function and you walk there, between a single particle and itself, in the liminal moment before concreteness and determinism asserts itself, before the observation is completed and the waveform collapses. To direct it, you seize a particle here and reach out across entanglement to find its twin in the place you wish to be."

"But-!" she exploded, almost falling off her chair in agitation.

"Don't ask how!" He held up a finger and looked over it at her, then shifted his head so their eyes were level. "I've told you. I've given you everything you need."

"You haven't told...!"

He shook his head, not unkindly or snobbishly, but matter-of-factly. "You would not forgive me, I think, if I spoon-fed you this answer."

She stared at him, her focus shifting all around his face. His eyes, shining with anticipation; the deep curve of his high cheekbones; the slight, encouraging smile to his slim lips; the starkly black curl resting on the right side of his forehead; even the sharp cut of his strong jawline. She could find nothing to help her, no tell, not even any trace that he was mocking her or that this was some kind of test. In fact, she suddenly felt that she knew how much this meant he respected her, how much he wanted to share in the joy of discovery instead of lording his superior understanding over her. Whatever his concept of science was, he saw that in their love of apperception they were the same.

Inspiration fired in her neurons and she slapped the table so hard that it slid crazily as one leg became momentarily longer than the others. "I know where to start!" she screeched. It wasn't quite 'I get it!', but it was what she had.

Luke smiled- the slow-spreading smile which began in the left corner of his mouth and made something ache in her chest- so big, so brightly, that it lit up his whole face.

"Of course you do," he said, like he'd never doubted it.

Acting, as ever, on impulse, she leaned over and kissed him. He jerked away minutely as her lips touched his and she was already thinking Oh God, I've really done it now, this will be the most awkward, humiliating... when he pressed tentatively back. Testing the waters, she opened her mouth and gently teased his bottom lip with both of hers. After a heartbeat's hesitation, he copied her,
slowly mirroring her subtle movements as he returned the kiss. It was tragically brief, but the jolt of chemistry or recognition or whatever it is when sparks fly, was so strong that she felt weightless and jittery as they parted.

When she looked up from his mouth to his eyes, he seemed almost frightened, his eyebrows drawn upwards in the middle with some enormous consternation.

"Jane," he whispered, shocked, "why did you do that?"

She stopped herself from laughing and kissing him again, but only just. She smiled instead, reaching up to tuck his hair back behind his ear. "Because I wanted to."
The desert was a vast, dark emptiness and he found himself drawn to gaze into it in search of comfort. The way the land rolled away was like the churning waves of the Asgardian sea as it poured over the edge of the world. Great needles of rock rose from the scrub like islands; a ridge on the horizon might be the mainland shrouded in mist. A wraith of the familiar seemed to hang suspended over this place of exile. In the moment that he was struck by the cruel contrast of these fancies with reality, it leached all beauty from the landscape. He had tried to shake off those well-remembered vistas, to see only what was there, but he could not cease to want and the imagined oceans lingered.

There was no real water for many days ride in any direction. He felt displaced by its absence- the silence where there should be lapping and trickling and the roar of distant falls- in a way he would never have anticipated. Water noise was something he'd taken for granted from his cradle, as axiomatic as his heartbeat. Now it was gone. Here, far from any mortal settlements, all he could hear was the wind singing over the dunes and hollows; an eerie, desolate sound unlike anything he had ever heard before.

‘Water is the blood of Asgard,’ his father lectured, looking past both of his sons to one of the ubiquitous reflecting pools which rose from the palace floor.

The labyrinthine network of canals and artificial springs that ran beneath and behind all surfaces of his home had been a source of some anxiety to him then, a small child who had recently learned that there were many places where it was possible to fall in. He’d had a nightmare of tumbling through the current, drowning in darkness, no one knowing what became of him.

‘It gives us life, power, and magic. It conveys us on our journeys, into this world in the birthing chamber and out of it to our ancestors in the funeral barge,’ Odin went on. ‘The sea is not to be trifled with.’

Thor pouted in thought, as if calculating how to challenge this thing which he’d been told was unchallengeable. At times the brothers were more alike than different.

The memory drifted away as quickly as it came.

Loki turned to stare up at the clear, cold stars and wondered what to tell Jane he was looking for there. He knew her curiosity was too tenacious, her spirit too incautious for her to ever stop pursuing an answer with the taste of palpable truth until he gave one to her.

The humour of it was that he didn't have one, not even for himself, not even a lie.

A bitterly cold wind whipped the long ends of his hair across his face. He considered sawing it off. It would not, after all, be the first time, and no one on Midgard would upbraid him for flouting Asgardian royal fashion. Would that he could so easily alter its awful blackness, but he could not; a part of his own person, it repelled harmful magic he cast at it. *No sorcerer unmakes himself.* A concealing glamour was the best he could do, and that was precarious when he couldn't guess how long he may need to maintain it or what rogue energies he may encounter. His idle thoughts of coming to call on Thor's little mortal looking like almost the twin of his brother- golden-haired and oafish, armed with that gormless expression which had always seemed to get Thor whatever he wanted- seemed terribly ill considered in retrospect.

He was pathetically glad he had not done it, for more reasons than he wished to examine. That Jane
saw his real face when she looked at him, as he was beginning to fear she sometimes saw his real
thoughts in his eyes.

She was not a woman whose favour was to be won by comely looks, he now knew. She was not so
frivolous and foolish as she had appeared when he gazed upon her from the throne of Asgard. She
had not tossed her heart on his brother's mercy and followed at his heels in devotion like so many
before her. Instead, she had been curious. She was interminably curious.

He had come to her in the first place because there was nothing left to him to live for and he had,
unfortunately, lived on. It was a source of some bitter amusement for him that he had told her that,
the truth, and she had mulled it over variously before eventually deciding she would not believe him.
An irony. It did perhaps lack the ring of complete honesty because it was hardly the only answer he
could give, even if it was the only answer he could give to her.

To himself he could admit that he cared enough for the world, even at the moment when he let go of
his brother in more ways than one, even as he was gratefully reaching out to embrace his death, that
some small part of him still wished to unravel the infuriating, baffling, excruciating enigma which
was Thor's sudden decision to grow up just as Loki finally despaired of him ever doing so. Thor who
never looked beyond his own nose, Thor who could be so brutish: pleading for the insignificant lives
of a handful of mortals and laying his pride at the feet of Jane Foster. What was she that she was
worth so much to someone who valued so little?

(And how dare she, how dare she change his brother, just a mortal, so fragile and temporary, so
quickly overturning a life centuries longer than she could ever hope to exist)

Perhaps these thoughts as he fell had drawn him to this realm.

He was also not certain whether he would use Jane's bridge- when it was finished- to make contact
with Asgard. Or to call Thor back to Midgard, or to return himself, or simply to send her there and
unleash that searching brain on the unprepared stagnation of the Aesir. Loki had imagined her there,
amidst the splendour of the court and the vastness of knowledge that the Elder Races had gathered.
She would turn and turn and never be satisfied, drunk with wonders. She would disorder all Asgard,
thrust her delightfully voracious mind into every aspect of its life until she had disassembled the
whole world, and he would laugh until he ached watching it. He might even help her put it back
一起. He would teach her the workings of the enormous floating towers and tiny magical trifles
alike.

He remembered the sheen of the high arches reflecting the dancing light of flames from the great
braziers, warmth rising through the floor from the core of the palace, the subtle smells of sunshine
and flower gardens which hung in her robes, and his mother's hand smoothing the curls out of his
hair.

"Don't be frightened, darling. Magic is will and knowledge, you have so much that I fear you need
more teaching than a Queen has time enough to give you. It is a very powerful gift, even your father
wasn't so advanced at your age. Here is not the best place for you to learn. And you'll be home
soon." Her eyes, so kind, so beautiful, brimmed with tears. They did not fall, and her voice did not
tremble. "You shall be home very soon."

Loki stared around the antechamber, at its familiar smooth walls with their comforting golden glow,
and swallowed around the rising lump in his throat.

"Mother..." This was his final leave-taking. Thor and Sif he bid goodbye that morning before their
lessons, and his father had offered parting words at supper the night before. After this he would be
gone. A servant stood by outside the door with his pony and an escort of royal guards to accompany
him to the Bifrost and through it to his elven tutors. "Mother, must I go?"

Frigga smiled and the tears spilled, but she was nodding. She always silently nodded 'yes' when he most wished she would speak and say 'no'.

It seemed to Loki that the best place for him was never where he found himself. (Dissatisfaction and hunger were his lot. He was lean and self-consuming.)

If he truly wanted to return, he could slip through the untrodden paths and do so noticed or unnoticed as it suited him. It would not be easy, he had not been to Midgard before and did not know his way back without the bridge. It could, however, be done and done alone.

He was so tired of being alone.

'No, Loki.'

He would never show Jane the shining magnificence of the palace or the colour of the gardens or the rudiments of magic. (Never see Asgard reflected in eyes that looked like his did.) Loki of Asgard was dead and could not go home. He was only the last echo of a song which had ended. He'd been a shadow even when he was alive.

'You were an innocent child...'

How could he be a child, an innocent child, if he were a monster? Oh, Father, Father, why did you make me this lost thing that I am. I should have died an infant on my own wretched world, I should never have been permitted to become this half and neither, powerful and mad mistake.

I belong to no one and no where, homesick for a home that was never mine to love. Oh Father, forgive me. Oh Father, I cannot forgive you.

Thor, his elder brother. Mighty Thor, Slayer of Giants.

Thor, not his brother, not his kinsman, or his blood, or his race. Thor, Slayer of Giants.

Honourable ancestors preserve me, by Bor's bloody beard- but they're not my ancestors to swear by are they. They're not my ancestors to call on or to honour. Would you have killed me with your own hands, brother, when you knew what I was? Of course you would. I have no ancestors to protect me, no family to demand blood price; I am no man. It would be no murder. Do giants even go to Hel? Do giants have souls?

Of course they don't. You cut a swathe through the monsters and would have brought glory to Asgard like your father before you.

But they must, they must- they are the eldest race, and if I am... and I...

No no no no no no no no no!

Jane. What would he say to Jane when she inevitably managed to build a working prototype? When she wanted to open a Bifrost and by so doing show Heimdall and Thor and Father that little Loki, nuisance and failure, with all his shames and sins, had not been destroyed. He was hidden now, he could remain hidden for the rest of his long life. He could find enemies of Asgard and throw his fate on their mercy, he could amass strength and make vassal worlds to offer to his father in proof of his capacity as a prince and a son of Odin, he could throw storms from his fingertips and astonish a young race into his service- live in mindless comfort in some primitive Realm. Be worshipped and convince himself that he was therefore worth something.
He did not want the lives which were still open for him to live, but that life he did want was closed to him forever.

*They will never forgive you.*

*Did they ever? Could anyone forgive such a birth? (Of course not, of course not, obviously they didn't. It all makes sense now.)*

He still wanted to die (he would never be brave enough to do it). *I don't want to know what I am, what I've done, what I haven't done, what I'm not and never will be.*

But Jane Foster, mortal pragmatist, who was honest as swords, stubborn as stone, beloved of Thor, had kissed him.

"*Because I wanted to.*"

Loki had never heard a more inexplicable sentence in his life. He'd stared at her, utterly speechless.

"*I was hoping you'd say that,*" she said to his silence, an enormous smile overtaking her full mouth. She glittered with energy and the fine lines of her delicate features occurred to his senses with such a sudden increase of vivid precision, it was like he had never appreciated them fully before this instant. So petite and elfin was she, her brown-gold eyes like mead in firelight and ringed with soft, full lashes, the curve of her chin begging to be touched, and her lips...

She kissed him again and his pulse thundered in his ears, his skin hot where she touched him and radiating strange warmth outward from the point of contact. He tasted her lip with the tip of his tongue and felt a shock like that of magic leaping from his finger.

Jane pulled reluctantly away, her smile returning at double strength. "*I gotta go or I am going to stay up all night trying to get that wormhole open right this minute and doing my best to bully more information out of you. I don't feel tired, but I know I was exhausted half an hour ago.*" She was lying, lying, lying. Was the kiss the lie or were the words? She wanted things from him. Even her bluntness must be hiding something.

"*Jane,*" he found himself stalling, his constantly whirling thoughts and treacherously over active imagination uncharacteristically still and blank. He had not the first inkling how to proceed, how he wanted to proceed. She was standing up and he could think of nothing to say.

"*Crash on the couch if you want. Good night, Luke.*" Her fingers brushed his cheek and she leaned down to kiss him for a third time on the mouth.

*He shivered and clutched briefly at her outer shirt, the loose fabric at her side fisted in his left hand. It slid through his fingers as she turned away. He did not want her to go. He watched her as she left.*

She had to be lying. Some part of her was lying. He had learned that humans were much the same as any other creature, they were only less subtle. Their lives were short, there wasn't time for subtlety. Their lies were brash, spontaneous, never playing for the long game.

Jane was an especially terrible liar. She was too impatient, too cocksure and sanguine.

He watched her as she left and wanted her to stay and wanted to tear her apart and wanted to frighten her and wanted to speak with her and wanted her.

*He had lied to her with the truth because it was simplest, because it would work, because it was all he felt capable to muster. The tiny flicker of his once-boundless curiosity and the remains of his pride*
were the only thing which compelled him to seek her out at all. There was nothing else. She was his last link in the universe to the life which had just ended. It was peerlessly important to wriggle into her affections (and yet he hardly cared, what did it matter, what did anything matter).

It had never been beyond him to use his own genuine emotions as tools of manipulation.

"Sometimes I'm envious, but never doubt I love you."

Thor's earnest face, his bright blue eyes and the softened edge of his smile. He was comforted.

Loki felt splintered, separated. His words were true and honest, his love for his brother above any question. Still, he would go on with his plan. He must do whatever was in his power to protect Realm and brother both, particularly from each other. No one else could look past their love long enough to see that Thor was damned to be a disastrous king. No one else could make Father see that his favoured first born son was not ready to follow in his father's footsteps. It was a service, not just to Thor or to Odin, but to the whole Nine Realms. Whatever it cost, it was worth more.

But Thor's smile pierced his heart. Thor's hand clasped his throat with unfeigned affection, and he ached.

I'm envious. I'm envious...

It was for the good of the Realm. Loki smiled back, forcing a quip and a laugh.

I'm envious.

And then I was afraid. So afraid of you, Brother Not-Brother, enough to show myself on Midgard and face you again. To tell you true lies: You could not return and ignite a civil war (discover the truth and slay the viper in the nest), provoke the giants further (expose that it was I who started all), Father might never wake up (I all but murdered him), Mother gave me the throne to bear (how could she how could she how could she). It was all your fault (it was my fault). Damn your (my) arrogance.

"I am so sorry," he'd said. And meant it, meant it, meant it. And yet the ugly satisfaction oozed into his heart to see Thor humbled, even as he was thinking, 'Look what you've wrought in your selfishness, you child,' and whether it was Thor or himself he was addressing made no difference.

No, never.

And Jane was so impetuous. She had tremendous trust in her gut, she had only infinitesimal control over her impulses. She responded very well indeed to the truth of his lies. Such a clever woman, thinking and rethinking and over-thinking every slightest aspect of the stars, she had no attention to spare for second guessing her instincts about anything that her heart could understand alone. The heart was not a duplicitious organ. Her heart believed his, because his heart did not lie; he provided her with sparing sips of his sincere pain. Her mind ignored its misgivings because he sated it with offerings of knowledge far beyond its furthest grasp, promises of coming wonders which would unmake the world it knew.

It had taken him time to perceive this beauty of hers. He exploited it long before he consciously observed it.

But her mind was so prodigious, her heart was so strong, and she was beautiful. A tiny mortal pet, that was what he had thought of her, but she was vast. Vast and fleeting. She'll burn out before she discovers aught of interest. Her flame will be extinguished, that kinship you think you've found at last will be gone again, and then what will your unlife be lived for?
I'll take her to Asgard, damn them all. What is left to lose? No throne, no love, no home. (It is gone already.)

I want to take her. (She will be gone soon enough and she is all that remains.)

Loki had never been good at denying himself what he wanted.
He walked back to the laboratory half in the folds of shadows using will and entanglement, and half over the conventional landscape using one foot placed in front of the other. He tried to concentrate on nothing more than the movements of his muscles and the rhythm of his breath, tried to find the quietness of mind which so consistently eluded him. It was no surprise to him that he had even less success than usual.

'A warrior's patience is constant and easy,' Odin said, illustrating his point with a hand swept through the air in a long, steady curve at the level of Thor's eyes. 'Like a reflecting pool. Not only is the surface calm, there are no currents beneath. From true stillness, all actions are possible, like the ready stance from which your sword can parry a blow in any direction. You see, my son?'

Thor nodded solemnly, but even from his hiding place on the gallery above, Loki could see the boredom in his brother's eyes.

He stopped, not wanting to return to the mortal settlement while his thoughts were still drifting so easily out of his control. Everything he had left at stake was precarious, his position delicate and dependant upon his ability to keep his equilibrium. What would he do if Jane's good sense were to finally prevail over her fascination? What was there to do? Everything on this planet was so breakable, in more ways than one, and he felt as though he were living in a realm of blown glass.

He remembered the first time Jane had unthinkingly touched him and being gripped by the sudden horror of realising that he had no idea exactly how fragile Midgardians really were. How much strength was too much? Not just to avoid arousing suspicion, but even to avoid injury. The limits and abilities of the weaker races were not a subject of much interest on Asgard, and he had seldom touched anyone without his immediate family unless it was with intent to cause harm.

The thick vein of ignorance he had unexpectedly found in himself appalled him.

His thoughts threatened to turn again to a similar ignorance which pained and relieved him in equal measure. That ignorance of his biological race. It was perhaps something to be thankful for that he had not been taught much about the oldest realm, that he knew little indeed beyond history of battles fought and fireside stories.

He ducked behind a pillar as Odin turned in his direction. The throne room was so vast, it was unlikely that even the All-Father would spot one little boy amongst the petitioners, but Loki had rather not risk it. He waited a few moments before peeking out again and was becoming absorbed in the proceedings when a hand on his shoulder made him start.

It was Thor's quizzical face he saw when he turned to look behind him.

'What are you doing, brother?' Thor said.

'Watching Father.'

Thor glanced over at the throne, where Odin was listening intently to the complaint of one of the landed nobility from Vanaheim. His brow furrowed. 'Why?'

'To learn how to be king,' Loki said imperiously, as if that should be obvious.

'But Loki, you won't be king. I'm going to be king.' The way that Thor said this sort of thing, as if he were only telling you that the sky was blue and how amusing of you to have forgotten, made the
sting both greater and less.

Loki pressed his lips together in annoyance. 'More harm comes from not knowing things than from knowing.'

How deeply he had been wrong in his youthful conceits. Not knowing was sometimes infinitely to be preferred.

All his years of filial piety, how they must have laughed. And he a creature with no father and no past. To whom could monsters hope to pray?

He looked down at his hands, balling into fists, and forced his fingers to relax. He had once been so proud of what he could do with these hands. His drawing, his sculptures, his magic: he was as deft and dexterous with his fingers as he was with his mind. Then he'd learned to fight and preened like the prize cock as he recognised his own physical grace, his precision, his marksmanship. Why had he ever thought it meant anything? Such talents, and all so worthless, so ill-used.

I did it for them. For my family, my people, my Realm.

Didn't I?

Round and round it goes. Wicked or mad or right, my very nature would have me unjustified no matter to what conclusion I cling. I am intrinsically wrong. How funny.

He saw Thor's face in his mind at the moment he'd let go of Gungnir. The dumbstruck shock, the dawning devastation in his brother's eyes. Thor's mouth was open in a scream, but Loki had heard nothing but the echo of Odin's dismissal (even the falls, thunderous before, were dumb to him). At the time he'd felt a flicker of satisfaction amidst the panic and shame and miserable desperation, a minuscule hint of gratification that his death still meant something to Thor. That he might be missed.

Now he doubled over, coughing on a sob which seemed intent to strangle him. He longed for home and brother and his old life with such sudden fierceness that it was like a blow to the belly.

'There's always a purpose to everything your father does.'

Bile rose in his throat, threatening to expel his last meal.

Mother, how could you. Even you.

His breath slowed as he clutched his temples with one hand and wrought the sand at his feet into glass with the other. The work of doing raw magic was soothing, draining the brittle edge from his emotions.

He walked again until he could see the spill of light from the town. The lab was close, the very last building before the little settlement gave way to emptiness and scrub. Loki sighed and reached out with probing tendrils of his consciousness, quickly discovering his customary audience in its customary places. The only change was a new listening device, its weak signal thrumming from beneath an abandoned car on the desert side of the laboratory. It was impertinently close to Jane's private chamber. Disapproving, Loki appeared next to it from a pocket of darkness and, the shroud of the still open pathway ensuring he was not observed, bent to lift the car up onto its side. The device was well hidden on a slope of the undercarriage, he would not have seen it if he had been checking for such things by crawling in the dirt as SHIELD would naturally assume he must. A touch of his fingertip overloaded the little circuit. The mortals would think it had failed on its own.

Putting the car down and slipping back the way he had come, he now allowed them to notice his
approach and gently drew back his obscuring veil from the reconnaissance devices which were directed towards the laboratory. No one would be there but Loki himself. Jane was in her trailer doing something still and quiet, sleeping he should hope. She seemed to imagine stimulants removed the need for sleep, but he had observed her thinking suffer with increasing severity as she deprived herself of rest. Erik Selvig would be in his own quarters in the village. He was watched separately, but Loki did not concern himself with that; whatever Selvig's secrets were, he had learned never to discuss those he shared with Jane outside of her presence. The futile desire to keep Jane out of anything dangerous had more to do with it than good sense did, Loki was sure.

The watchers must be allowed an occasional unobstructed view or they would begin to suspect there was something to see, so he chose his moments to give them one. Loki supposed that SHEILD considered themselves utterly safe from discovery, masters of the clandestine. He smiled to himself. How the other humans did continuously underestimate Jane Foster. She had assumed they were watching from the beginning. Jane, perhaps naïvely, gave them the credit of believing they wouldn't interfere stupidly in her work. She was too optimistic, as per her wont, but Loki's careful censoring had deftly avoided several potentially catastrophic overreactions by those who would not have listened to reason.

His background as an earthling existed on one level for Jane and Erik's benefit- should they decide to go looking- and another for SHEILD's. They thought he was a plant from the less savoury portion of Selvig's background. They monitored him closely, but not half so closely as he imagined they would if they knew the truth. Even if the worst came to pass when the bridge was complete and the mortals attempted to capture him, he was- unlike Thor- in full possession of his strength and foresaw no great difficulty in extricating himself. They could do nothing to detain him if he decided to use force, though he didn't anticipate that becoming necessary. His cunning alone was far more than they could hope to cope with.

He paused as he entered the lab, listening to the radio chatter of the agents who were tracking him:

"Luke's back."

"Keep alert, he never sleeps through the night. Watch to see if he messes with the computers. Hennigan saw him do it once, but the camera couldn't see the screen. We've repositioned, so we should see now."

"The high ups think he's faking it? Scamming her?"

"Nope. Not unless he's got some kind of remote interference we've never seen before. Tech guys confirmed Dr. Foster's equipment was reporting accurately while they were all out in Vegas the other week. They're changing the rules in there."

Loki doubted either of them truly gripped the magnitude of what he and Jane were doing. So few people appreciated of what real power was made.

A learned sage knelt before him with his father's (not his father) spear of kingship, and in his fear he was a child again. He shrunk from it and the very walls seemed to loom about him, suddenly threatening in their weight and magnificence. The spear stretched to hideous proportions in his sight, prodigious in the massive hands of the elder who held it, towering even on his knees. The world was vast and incomprehensible, full of terrible magics and monsters which Loki could not hope to control or understand.

He turned to his mother, as he ever had. His mother who was patient with his questions, who was compassionate about his fears and doubts. His father's patience was weighed and measured, his father's compassion was in merciful justice, because his father was a king. Since he was very little,
Loki had sensed the reserve placed upon his father's love, the burden of expectation and duty. A king's robes were not to be clutched, a king's dignity was not to be impeached by a child's demands of succour for trivial hurts.

Loki's eyes had opened to his own place in the universe soon after they had opened to his father's. He was a prince of the Realm and a son of Odin, he must not ever be perceived as anything less. The weight of the crown was such that it was not carried merely by the king, but by all who shared his blood and intimacy. The first duty was to Asgard, and all else was second.

Thor did not understand this, he did not need to. Thor's princeliness was without effort or affectation, nothing he need be cautious to preserve or fearful of neglecting. He felt no hesitation or embarrassment in his love because he was so much his father's natural son that his childish needs and wants never seemed to offend their mutual royalty.

It was Loki's earliest conscious jealousy that he could feel no such ease, could only watch as the distance between himself and his father yawned wider. The love he bore for Odin throbbed painfully, unexpressed in his breast, and he swallowed it when it bubbled towards his mouth, he denied it when it tingled in his limbs, he banished it to the deepest parts of himself until it became a fathomless well of discontented loneliness. It tasted of bitterness and injustice. At times he hated his brother.

He had never hated his father, though Loki could see in that one, shrewd eye that his father knew and understood and yet offered no assistance. Odin could look through him with such horrible knowing. Every foible, every frailty. Odin had not needed to go to war in a generation because so many battles had been won with a glance and a conversation. Loki knew he'd been found wanting, his father picked out and dismissed his attempts at silver-tongued rhetoric as easily as he did a dropped guard on the exercise field.

But Mother cultivated him. She could touch him and coddle him and comfort him, her dignity was not injured by his pawing. When she had time and freedom, she taught him magic with her own hands and watched his sword katas with a keen critical gaze. Hers was the only critical gaze he could suffer. She did not dismiss his style as cowardly, she did not complain that he wasn't strong enough or bold enough. She taught him the sword cack-handed when the swordmaster would not, and she taught him to throw daggers when he asked her to, though it was considered a skill beneath a prince's notice.

His mother believed, somewhat heterodoxically, in being practical about violence. Loki went further. He believed it should be avoided for as long as was possible, that it was only reasonable not to risk death where it was not necessary. He told this to no one in so many words. He knew what they would say. What even Mother would say.

As he grew to the cusp of manhood, still Frigga reached up her hand and smoothed the curls from his hair. He had used to wonder if she hated its blackness, if she regretted his unfortunate appearance that so set him apart from his family. Now he wondered if she had always been thinking of the monstrous truth: that he was none of hers, he was the snake in the skin of the lion.

Even she. Even she who had doted on him could not tell him the truth. Even she had no compunction, no compassion for the misplaced monster. Even she cared more for Thor's banishment than for his world coming to an end. More fool he, who had thought she must specially prize him at least a little as her youngest and the child most after her own heart. The niggling voices which had reminded him that she did not defend him, she did not keep him with her, she must wish he were otherwise, had been speaking the truth all along.

The sadness and regret (what was there in his life which was not to be regretted?) weighed on his shoulders like ill-fitting armour. He barely paid attention to the SHIELD agents as they speculated on
his movements and argued about whether they should attempt to follow him in future.

The reckoning was coming for Jane Foster, as it had come for him. The difference being that Jane would not crumple beneath it. She knew who she was, her cause was just, and she would give up when breath left her body- not before. She was strong and stubborn like an Asgardian, but she was as rational and pragmatic as any elf. It was a shame she seemed impervious to the ideals of diplomacy, but one could not have everything.

If they came for her before she was ready, he would protect her. Already he protected her, and it was so easy that he almost wished the humans could present a greater challenge. Perhaps he was learning from past mistakes by only almost wishing it, but he was more inclined to judge it the ugly head of his cowardice rearing again. His virtues were few and unlikely to increase; he saw himself too clearly now to believe otherwise.

Unprompted and unwilling, he thought of the desolate waste of Jotunheim and wondered how it had looked when the giants still possessed the Casket.

'You know not what your actions would unleash. I do.'

Whether it was the weight of aeons in the tone or the suggestion of wisdom where there must be none, the recollection of that now-silenced voice made him shiver.

He decided to conjure a bisected worm into the pack lunch of the SHIELD agent who always referred to Loki as 'the undertaker' and knew his mood would improve after he heard the inevitable scream. He amused himself with the suspicion that Jane, if she knew about it, would approve of the jest.
Jane let the lab door slam and bounce shut behind her, her arms overflowing the scattered notes she'd been making for most of the night. Not looking up from her precariously balanced tower of print-outs and notebooks, she managed to crash into the edge of one of the more solid tables and dump her burden. It dispersed itself into an uneven sprawl on top of a keyboard and a pile of star charts. She blew her hair out of her face and glanced around the room.

The top of Luke's head was visible over the back of one of the office chairs, a beacon of shocking black against the white vinyl. She stomped over, dragging her boots behind her heels with every step. Jane hadn't had the motivation to untie them enough to get her feet all the way in when she was leaving the trailer this morning. It was probably for the best that her entry was raising such a clamour. She doubted she could sneak up on Luke even if her life depended on it, but she also had a strong feeling it wouldn't be the greatest idea to startle him when he thought he was alone.

She clattered all the way up behind him before stepping out of the boots, but he made no move to acknowledge her presence. She looked down over his head to see what he was doing and found a legal pad resting on his knee. He was drawing some kind of schematic, maybe a generator, and he was making notations in a spiky scribble that she couldn't read. Leaning on the back of the chair and resting her cheek on her folded forearms, she turned to look into his face. He frowned at his work, his eyebrows pressing towards each other in concentration as he altered an angle in the design. His hair was tucked behind his ears, but it was threatening to escape out from under them, and its volume framed his face like a black halo. Falling in broad waves near his hairline, it became increasingly curly towards the ends and around the nape of his neck.

She felt the pull of a familiar urge. Jane had never cared a whole lot about social formality, but she'd been valiant in her resistance of this urge for weeks, because personal space did seem awfully important to Luke. Then again, the personal space line had definitely been crossed the night before, and it had gone pretty well, all things considered. She decided to stop resisting. Sliding one arm out from under her chin, she reached up to run her fingers through his hair. The texture was unlike anything she'd ever felt, the strands silky but resistant to friction and almost seeming to grip her fingers as she combed them through. She felt the giddy thrill of mussing his perfectness that she'd anticipated, but also a heady rising warmth that settled in her sternum, just below her throat, and made her wish she could pause the world for a second. She wanted to stay here and now for a bit, knowing she had time to enjoy it, knowing it was safe.

Luke leaned into her hand as her palm cupped the curve of his skull, letting her hold the weight of his head for an intimate moment. Then he hummed on a note which could have been appreciative or interrogative in tone.

"Good morning," was all he said.

"Hey," Jane answered, not quite sure of herself all of a sudden. A spell had been broken by his voice, and the certainty, the ease of the physical closeness seemed to abandon her.

"I've made you a present," he announced with total nonchalance, ignoring her hesitation.

Jane fluffed his hair with her nails before withdrawing her hand and raising an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really?" She felt safe again. Casual.

"Indeed." He pointed into the kitchen area with his chin. Following the direction of the gesture with her eyes, she noticed the coffee pot full and steaming.
"You made coffee?" Jane asked, surprised and not a little suspicious.

"It would seem so, wouldn't it?" he drawled, sketching something round on his legal pad.

Jane walked over to the kitchen counter, sniffing the air. It smelled like coffee. She grabbed a mug and poured, smelling again, then turned to glare at Luke over her shoulder. He wasn’t looking at her, but he was smirking down at his drawing.

"What's the catch?"

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you. There is no way you randomly decided to do something domestic. You don't even drink coffee."

Luke twirled his pencil in his left hand, clearly enjoying himself. "So very much was made, by you and Miss Lewis, and even Erik Selvig, about your abject failure to use that machine. Miss Lewis mentioned she had forbidden you to touch it. I found myself impossibly curious to know what convoluted technical marvel could stymie such a capable scientist, a scientist who so excels at engineering that her entire lab is stocked with home made equipment." Luke showed every single one of his teeth when he looked up and grinned at her. "Imagine my shock to discover the mechanism so simple, the lower primates could likely be taught to manage it without great difficulty."

Jane frowned hugely and was opening her mouth to retort when he started cackling at her indignation.

"It's tricky," she insisted, miffed. She had misaligned the basket or something when she flooded the counter, that could happen to anyone, and she'd forgotten to change the filter a few times. Even simple things could go wrong when you didn't pay attention. She'd accidentally fried an automatic rice cooker once, too, because she hadn't read the instructions. Not that she would mention that to him.

"No!" Luke insisted, still laughing, "it isn't!"

"I'm surprised you lowered yourself from on high long enough to do something that close to manual labour. Weren't you worried you'd get your sleeves dirty?"

His good humour wasn't the slightest bit dented by her bitterness and his smile only grew brighter as she glared at him. "I considered it an act of charity towards the less able."

Jane squawked in outrage, half ready to dump the coffee over his head.

"Besides, you will presumably be needing one of your 'caffeine boosts' to build this." He waved the schematic at her. Tempting her with it.

Not at all forgiving him, she inched closer to his chair. "And that is what?"

"Think of it like the needle on a compass." He held it up, smugly, like he knew he'd won.

She took the drawing and he rose to stand beside her, leaning close to point out the key features of the design. This put his belly at just about her elbow level, and she was already pulling back to give him a good jab in the gut before he finished his first sentence. He didn't even pause as he moved his hand up to catch hold of her arm. She struggled, but she couldn't budge his grip. Her revenge was thwarted. Now she absolutely could not let him get away unscathed.
"Fight fair, Jane," he admonished as she squirmed, obviously amused.

She scoffed. "Like you would!"

"Victory is always fair." He chuckled when she tried to get her other arm in between their bodies. She couldn't get a good angle of attack and she couldn't get free. "Good tactics are the ultimate equaliser, and they are available to all."

"Can't argue with that," Jane agreed. She slid her hand down his side until she found a fleshy spot below his hip and pinched him, hard. When he flinched away in surprise, he bent further forward and thus down into her reach, whereupon she grabbed his face and kissed him. His guard dropped instantly, as Jane had known it would, and she nudged him in the stomach with her fist, just to prove that she could.

He made a small sound of protest into her mouth, though his focus was obviously no longer on their battle of wills. His hand came to rest tentatively at her waist, steadying her as she rolled up onto her tip toes for better access, but his posture remained awkward as he struggled to stay at her level. Jane's fingers went back to his hair, threading through it and tilting his head the way she wanted it as she coaxed his lips apart with hers. Even with the space between their bodies, only the kiss connecting them, she felt heat rushing into her face and her extremities tingling. It was like being a teenager again, kissing for the first time, everything uncertain and new and about to explode the moment they figured out how to fit together without getting in each other's way. He was so tall, if he'd only pick her up everything would be better. Everything would be mind blowing. It hadn't occurred to him yet, but she'd make sure it did.

Luke sighed something incoherent as he allowed her tongue to slip into his mouth, his fingers reflexively squeezing her hip. It had a tone almost of realisation, maybe awe. Oh.

"Well, I saw this coming," Erik's voice, dripping with disapproval, threw a bucket of ice over the proceedings.

Luke jumped away from her, blushing to the roots of his hair, but his expression was more of anger than embarrassment. Saying nothing, he looked first at Jane, then at Erik, then stalked over to the atom smasher and pretended it urgently needed his undivided attention. He started unscrewing bolts and pulling pieces off with his bare hands.

Jane put pressure on her temples with one hand, flapping the other one at Erik in what she hoped was a clear signal to shut up. He shrugged, mouthing "what?". Jane could have punched him. She was pissed about the proprietary tone of his interruption, pissed that the morning had been going really nicely and now seemed to be taking a turn for the frustrating, and above all pissed that she couldn't yell at either of them without making a scene she was dead certain she'd regret.

She made a zip it motion at Erik, seizing his sleeve to drag him over to her notes from the previous evening. Luke ignored them with such intensity that she could feel him ignoring them from across the lab.

"I know how we're going to start," Jane said abruptly, her tone insistent. She was going to pretend it hadn't happened and everyone could just damn well follow her lead.

"Start what?" Erik asked, too loudly, obviously annoyed with her avoidance and only playing along under protest. "Power transfer? Navigation? Safe-"

"Everything. Just listen. We've been thinking about this the wrong way. Luke said-"
"Oh, Luke said!" He gestured dramatically, as if that surely solved everything.

She just glared at him, crossing her arms and waiting for him to realise how insulting he was being. If everyone around her was going to start acting like a five year old, she was going to start assigning time outs.

Erik took a long, deep breath through his nose and looked away. "I'm sorry."

"I'm a grown-up now, Erik," Jane whispered fiercely, leaning close to avoid being overheard. "You know exactly how unfair you're being! We could- Luke and I- do this without you. I know we could, and I think you know it too. But I'd like you to be here, I'd really like you to be part of it and be happy for me and get to see this happen. If you can accept that this is my lab and my choice, and I'm not being impulsive or crazy this time. I've got perfectly adequate critical thinking skills."

He nodded, his eyes on the table instead of on hers. He looked suitably chastened, but Jane was under no illusions that he had stopped thinking she needed his protection and his good sense to prevail. She decided to take the acquiescence for what it was worth and leave the rest for another day.

"The keys are willpower and quantum entanglement," she soldiered on, unable to contain her desire to get back to what was really important.

"What?" Erik looked at her like she had seven heads.

She tried to explain it as best she could, adding the work she'd done overnight, expanding on what Luke had told her in words with some real math. Maybe if Luke had helped her lay it out, she could have gotten it across better, but she floundered in the attempt to articulate the ineffable truth she'd finally grasped the previous evening, even with far more concrete data. Jane wondered if she was bad at explaining the abstract without a full array of equations at her command, or if Erik's mind just wasn't fertile soil for this kind of borderline metaphysical quantum interpretation. She hoped his hostility wasn't getting in the way, because that would be such a shame it didn't bear thinking about.

"I don't understand," Erik said for the fourth or fifth time, now with an air of finality.

It had taken over three hours to reach this impasse, and Luke had gradually stopped pointedly pretending that they were not in the room, but Jane noted that his personality had retreated back behind the chilly veneer of stand-offish formality. The difference between what he was like when he was starting to relax and what he was like the rest of the time was becoming increasingly dramatic.

"Perhaps you never shall," he commented in clipped tones. He ripped a page off his note pad and crumpled it up. "Jane, if you have finished wasting time, we have much to do."

She got up and brushed herself off. Trying for a reassuring smile at Erik, she said, "We'll talk again later, maybe. You wanna start lunch or-"

"I'm not a cook," Erik muttered, apparently put out by his inability to catch up with them. "I'll go back to town. Pick something up."

"Okay." Jane watched him shrug into his coat and bustle out the door, feeling suddenly guilty that she hadn't wanted to call her mentor right away when she'd had the breakthrough. She did want to share it with him, but his approval wasn't the most important thing any more.

She turned back to Luke to see him shoving piles of paperwork and books to one side of the table, clearing a space for him to lay out all of his legal pad drawings.
"Any action carried out on an entangled particle is carried out on the whole quantum system, instantaneously, which then collapses," he said to the tabletop. "When you measure-"

Jane slid her arm around his waist and tucked herself into his side. He had faltered the moment she touched him.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't care what anyone says about this." She waved her hand back and forth, gesturing to herself and then to him. She was far from ready to put a name to it, but it was Something.

Luke stared at her silently.

"Just so you know. It's got nothing to do with anybody else and no one else is going to mess with it one way or the other. I'm not going to accept the ice prince treatment because Erik saw you being vulnerable or whatever that was about."

His hand drifted up her back, and he started winding her hair around his palm. His eyes were slitted as he leaned back to look down at her. "Jane, I fear one day you will be honest with someone who is not strong enough for the truth."

She shivered as his twisting disturbed the hairs at the back of her neck. The movements of his arm made long muscles in his back shift under her hold, and her fingers convulsed against his side as she battled an impulse to follow their contours with her hands.

"I suppose I must continuously pray for strength," he said, and it sounded like a promise. He let his hand pull gently free, then touched her lip with his thumb. It seemed like he wanted to say more, but he eventually turned back to the schematics.

"So what does this have to do with entanglement?" she prompted, trying to spare him.

He shot her a half smile which might have been grateful or might have been knowing, then returned to lecturing mode. "By observing decoherence just before it happens, by causing it, you may find the quantum system which will allow you to navigate across the stars. You know where you are going because now you have additive probability, the appearance of a wave function collapse. You have a single, knowable eigenstate, then it is a matter of your will."

"Okay, I'm hearing that this is measuring a superposition specifically to decohere the system and therefore create an observable decay in the entangled particles. And using that traceable decay, we can see where we're going, so to speak." Jane chewed on her lip, tapping on Luke's ribcage with her fingertips. She'd practically forgotten her arm was around him at this point, her brain a million miles away. "I think I follow, but you talk a lot about getting in between measurement and its effects, and I don't see how that's possible. Either you've measured or you haven't, there's no in between."

"Time is relative, Jane. All modern physics already acknowledges that it is so, but they have not followed the path as far as it goes. It goes into the dark of the great unknown." His eyes lit up with mischief, teasing her.

She found herself laughing a little, not sure why. "Oh, so we're going through the looking glass now, are we?"

He smiled uncertainly at her, obviously confused by the reference but trying not to show it. She found it really endearing that he was pretending for her sake. That's how she knew she was in trouble.
"What happens after we know where we're going?" She pulled away from him and bent over the designs, furrowing her brow as she kidded herself that she could make heads or tails of them.

He cocked his head to the side. "I imagine you've pored over everything I've said enough to know by now."

"You know, I realised last night that I've heard of something kind of like your theory before. It was the consciousness causes collapse interpretation of the measurement problem. It goes that the apparatus used to measure is just the same as the rest of the universe, made up of the same atoms and systems. It should be able to observe a superposition- but it never does, it's always a single outcome." She paced a bit, trying to dred up more detail from a disused cold storage area in her memory; if she hadn't been in the field so long it might have occurred to her to mention this earlier, saving them both some arguments. "The theory says that it's consciousness which actually makes the wave function collapse, the non-physical mind which isn't made up of the same stuff, so the non-physical mind is actually necessary to the process. I remember thinking that was bananas."

"Such a way with words you have, Jane." He leaned against the table, his fingertips trailing over the surface. "And now what do you think?"

"I think you've convinced me that's only the tip of the non-physical iceberg."

He pushed off the table and came close to her, lifting his hands to cup the sides of her head. "Everything necessary to change your world forever is right here, in your mind. If you can't imagine doing it with your mind alone, you still have my antimatter and therefore the power, you have the knowledge and understanding to use it, you have the will. Your will burns so brightly, Jane Foster, it is amazing your form can contain it."

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she deflected lamely, embarrassed by his intensity.

Luke was, as always, totally innocent of the cliché and seemed to take her completely seriously. "I have said so to no one. Do you believe me?"

She wasn't sure whether he meant the compliment or that he'd never used it as a line. Either way, the answer was the same. She looked up into his sober, pensive expression and her heart did a little flip flop. "Of course I believe you."

"Then you'll believe me when I tell you we will have this bridge open in less than a week."

Somewhat to her own amazement, she nodded that she did. Suddenly it all seemed so clear, and if there was lingering doubt and if there was still a big black unknown spot, she had faith that she would know what to do when the moment came. It was coming together in her head, beyond theory and into actionable plans. She knew what to build and how to build it, she knew that it would work.

What would happen after the bridge was opened, she was too focussed and too excited to contemplate. The only frisson of fear was the fear that someone would snatch her victory away from her.

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"I've got something you might want to listen to here, sir."

"If this is more super high quality audio of Ramirez eating Doritos, I'm going up the chain about you clowns."

"No, sir. Sound flickered out, dropped in suddenly, and then the conversation got real interesting. I
think they might have been filtering us and whatever the disruption was, it failed."

"This whole time? Without us detecting it? Don’t be-"

"I really think you should just listen, sir. You might still want to go up the chain."

"Gimmie the 'phones."
Jane's brain was in triple overdrive.

She was utterly consumed by her work in a way she hadn't been since right after Thor's departure. Her hands couldn't move fast enough to keep up with her thoughts and her computers took too long to spit out results, so she used three at once, staggering equations so the data kept coming. She left dozens of tasks half-finished everywhere she went, leaping from one thing to another any time physical necessity threatened to slow her down. Sleeping and eating were inconveniences she probably wouldn't have bothered with if she were on her own.

Fortunately, for that reason among others, she wasn't. Luke trailed after her cleaning up her creative carnage, redrafting her woefully inadequate blueprints and covering all of her notes and plans with corrective marginalia. He had the innate visual-spatial skills of an artist, the precision of an architect, and always understood what her plans had intended to convey no matter how poorly she expressed it. He couldn't always follow the actual math in her notes, but he appreciated the processes she was exploring and could tell her when she was barking up the wrong tree. Erik also followed along in her footsteps and checked over the electrical dangers sometimes posed by her many technical kludges, dismantling and rewiring when the threat of a fire hazard or blown computers became imminent.

Erik still did not see how what they were doing was possible, and he had become borderline shifty when Jane tried to talk to him about it. There were days he seemed at the end of his patience, but he still wanted to help, he said, just in case he was wrong. Luke was steadfastly pretending nothing awkward had happened he that was aware of, just as Jane had hoped he would. Failing to follow a good lead, Erik pulled her aside the morning after the interrupted kiss incident wanting to have A Talk. He'd waited until Luke was in the shower and out of earshot, then he'd extracted a promise from Jane that she would try her very best to pay attention.

The promise was not sufficient motivation for her to stop trouble-shooting some software she was tweaking, but she felt she could multi-task.

"We still don't know who he is, what he wants, any of it," Erik insisted, his expression pleading. "I know it's your life Jane, but this is bigger than what you want. This is bigger than just your life. The technology we're developing- it needs to stay in the right hands."

"I may be just a crackpot in the desert, but my hands are fine. Everything was discovered by someone, every giant leap forward has been dangerous," she complained haltingly as she searched for an elusive bug. He was turning into a Luddite. "My first duty is to knowledge, we can't back away from this because it's scary. We're scientists, this is what we do. I can't bury this or lie about it because someone might misuse it. That's how societies get backward, and it's basically playing God."

He held up his hand, nodding and shushing, "That's not what I'm suggesting. We should go to SHIELD-"

Jane's eyes went wide, and she finally glanced away from the computer to meet his pleading gaze, opening her mouth to protest.

"You don't trust them, I know- neither do I, but they are better equipped than us to handle this, Jane. If something goes wrong, we're not equipped at all." He rubbed a hand over his hair, looking tired and unhappy, "I don't like handing them the keys to the kingdom any more than you do, but I think we need them."
"I have them as a safety net, they are nominally the lead investors in my research and unofficially my backup. I don't need to be on their turf, on a leash, getting everything taken away from me as soon as it's worth anything. If I was willing to put up with that, I would be there already." She found what she was pretty sure was the problem area she'd been hunting for the past hour and gritted her teeth as she tried to figure out how to fix it. "If it weren't for Thor, I don't think I would have had a choice."

"But we know what SHIELD wants, we know they aren't going to steal your work and use it for war or-"

"Do we know that?" Jane deleted some lines of code and racked her brain for programming basics she'd neglected of late. There was no guarantee she wouldn't make it worse.

She heard Erik sigh heavily. "All right, no, we don't. But SHIELD at least answers to the government, and they are a better option than a stranger who carries around materials unknown to science and won't explain anything about himself."

"And here I thought you were warming up to him."

"I was, and that's the problem," he insisted, bothered she didn't see it that way. "Why are we letting our guard down? You're bringing him further and further into your work and your life, and you know no more about him than you ever did. You never even told me his last name."

Jane paused in her typing, struck. "Oh God, I don't really remember. I googled him after he left that first day, but... Maybe Woden-something?" Her eye caught on an undeclared function and she gleefully set about fixing it. When she looked up, Erik was gone.

He'd been even more hard to get along with after that, sometimes disappearing for hours at a time, but he seemed determined to stay in the game nonetheless. It wasn't an ideal situation, not having a solid team, but Jane couldn't spare the time or the energy to try to improve it and she was so preoccupied that she barely noticed anyway. Her working situations had rarely been ideal, and this one was probably the best she'd ever had.

She did eventually notice that it seemed like Luke was always at her side, whispering incitement and direction in her ear. Though he did vanish periodically between hovering over her and cleaning up her intellectual loose ends, it was rare that he was not there when she looked up from her work. His voice was a constant soothing hum of encouragement and what she was fond of calling his 'poetic-science', tantalising stanzas on star-walking and willpower and consciousness. Occasionally the thrum of that lovely baritone reminded her that she had emotions other than razor focus and frenzied excitement and she regretted not engaging him when he made little attempts to play games with her.

It took her a while, but she saw that that was what he was doing. Like a wolfhound with a ball, he'd saunter up and drop some harmless but mildly inflammatory comment at her feet, then wait with predatory eyes to see if she would throw it back at him. He wanted her to take the bait. She wasn't sure if that was his way of letting off steam or amusing himself or what, but if it was, it seemed like a vaguely unhealthy life strategy. Though she didn't think it had to be, it had real potential for ugliness. She was reminded of a great aunt who made subtle prods at family dinners until everyone was fighting with everyone except her. Then she sat back and watched.

That was something she hadn't seen him do, though she could imagine it of him. His serves to her were all about provoking her into a completely insincere argument where they could trade escalating sarcasm without any malicious intent. Jane suspected that competitive exponential wordplay might be his favourite pastime. The better his mood, the less she could get away with imprecise statements or unintended connotations. When he was bored (maybe lonely?), he picked fights.
She sometimes returned to the land of living long enough to wonder these things (did he just want her attention?), and recall that he was amazing and beautiful as well as capricious. Jane found herself sometimes lost in his mind, in his gorgeous capacity for understanding, and it stilled her racing thoughts. A flooding tenderness would well up in her chest until she could barely stand it, until she found herself obsessed with some small detail of his, like the shell of his ear or the straight slope of his nose. He was becoming more receptive when she expressed her feelings on those matters, when she just had to caress his cheekbone or press a chaste kiss to his chin. He no longer questioned or rebuked her constant desire to touch him in small ways when she talked with her hands, instead accepting her casual affection like he might accept being trusted by a wild animal he was studying. Cautiously, as if any sudden movements would scare her off.

He tolerated the way she liked to straighten his (always already immaculate) clothes and mess up his (usually already tousled) hair, the impulsive hugs she gave him when her code compiled, and being pressed into service around the lab as a human step ladder, but he never initiated any form of contact. Though he had very much seemed to tacitly enjoy any and all touch which she gave him, she was the one in control. He only followed her lead.

It would have been one of the most wonderful, fulfilling times in her life if Jane were not so frantic with anticipation, her concentration chaotically dedicated to any one of the thousands of things she had to get ready. She would have worried that she was becoming clinically manic if she had time for that sort of thing.

Four days since the semi-mutual promise that the bridge would be completed and testable in a week, Jane's thoughts turned suddenly to Thor. Thor the person as well as what he represented. The person who had been arrogant and oblivious and socially impaired, but who had also adapted to difficult circumstances at break-neck speed and shown pure spirited kindness and tremendous willingness to concede when he had been wrong. Thor who had had such a profound effect on her life. The gnawing unknown about what exactly had happened to him rose again to prominence in her mind. They had been forced to assume that everything had gone well when he went through the wormhole. It seemed reasonable based on the inconclusive evidence available to them, and the fact that the alternative was unbearably depressing. But the time was drawing near when she might find out otherwise. Her decision to proceed as if things were good may have been the wrong one. Or maybe things were great on his end and he just couldn't be bothered to contact them, which would be less awful and still upsetting.

Of what to expect if she saw him again, she had no inkling. The state of his world and of intergalactic politics was a total unknown, even whether Thor's word that he would protect the earth meant anything about the intentions of the rest of his people. There was also the niggling detail that she'd practically mauled him right before he left. What had he thought that meant? It seemed like a good idea at the time, but she was dealing with an alien culture which appeared pretty archaic in terms of societal construction. Who the hell knew what Thor thought their relationship was?

She felt guilty even worrying about it, since Earth could be in deadly peril if Thor had failed to put right whatever it was that went wrong. She was putting the planet in potential danger and thinking more about possible social awkwardness than about the very real threat posed. Awesome job, Jane. Priorities on point, as usual.

She rolled over in bed, kicking at the wall of her trailer to ground herself in the present, and again tried telling herself to just go to sleep. She only ever thought about all these worst case scenario doubts and terrors when she was trying desperately not to think about work long enough to relax. The attempt to clear her mind just set her off again and she was already reaching for the bed side lamp and her notebook when she caught herself.
Sleep, Jane. You'll be no good to science if your brain starts leaking out your ears.

Hoping to lull herself into a pleasant stupor, she thought about how earlier that day she had suddenly awoken from the concentration of crunching numbers to find Luke holding her hand while he sat beside her making notes on an experimental brief she'd written.

Sensing her gaze, he'd glanced up and smiled at her, squeezing her fingers in acknowledgement and thus stirring a cosy feeling in her chest. She'd leaned over to kiss the corner of his mouth and ruffle his hair so it would curl. Then he'd deliberately ruined the moment by saying something facetious about only holding her hand to stop her from compulsively tapping her fingers while she thought, and she'd mimed smacking him on the shoulder.

The memory worked for a second, distracting her and giving her a dreamy smile. Then she wondered when their tentative connection would grow into something more substantial, whether she could have a real future together with Luke, and the thought was pretty much the death knell of her getting a good night's sleep. What killed her was that she had not realised how much she wanted them to have a future until it occurred to her that it might not be an option.

They finished building the thing on the roof, reinforcing the assembly of the parts they already had and then fitting it for what remained. The process went shockingly smoothly and now it was done. She wasn't sure what to call it other than Bridge Thing. Maybe if it worked she would make the effort to come up with something fancier. Meanwhile, it was time to move the antimatter into place for the reaction. They would be on a schedule starting the next day, rigidly worked out so that as many parts of the process could be observed as precisely as possible. Jane had drawn up an itinerary with Darcy's over-the-phone advice on what would make it look more like she'd had a secretary do it for her.

Darcy once spent a high school semester working co-op as a personal assistant to a corporate bureaucrat type. She assured Jane that her lab records would be in a museum some day and it was important that they look suitably impressive.

Jane sent Erik back into the city for the day to get more sensitive equipment than she could lay hands on in Puente Antiguo, and she could only pray he made it back in time for them not to have to wait another day to start up the planned order of events. Jane wasn't exactly awesome at adhering to a strict schedule if no one or nothing was actively forcing her. She was a spontaneous, work when you're inspired and don't stop until you pass out type of person. Luckily, her chosen field more or less allowed this philosophy, other than time sensitive stellar phenomenon.

Luke's antimatter Tupperware required minor adjustment on his part before it could go in the bridge thing, but he wouldn't let her wander back to her calculations even once he had told her this and sat down at her desk to work on it. He caught hold of her wrist, not looking at her, and tugged gently until she stepped back to his side. She waited for him to say what he wanted, but he didn't. Even when he needed two hands and was forced to let go, he remained silent.

"Okay," she drew the word out into a question. When he still didn't say anything, she added, "Did you need me?"

"Yes," he said.

Jane waited again. She waited some more. Giving up, she prompted him, "For...?"

"This is ready." Luke spun up to his feet with dramatic flourish and headed for the roof in long,
purposeful strides. His free arm came out as he passed and swept her up in his wake. The way just his hand, from palm to fingertips, spanned almost her entire back made her feel all tingly. She packed that overzealous reaction up for later, trying not to think too much about the heat of his skin seeping through her shirt.

"You're acting weird," Jane commented, carefully using her most non-judgemental tone so he would know it wasn't an accusation. She allowed him to practically carry her up the narrow folding stairs which would take them outside.

Distracted, he answered off-handedly, "I have it on your reliable authority that I am weird."

The world's most passive frog march came to an abrupt halt when they reached the bridge device and Luke stopped dead.

Jane looked between her creation and his almost stricken facial expression upon seeing it, feeling a bit out of her depth. "I mean weird even for you."

Not answering, he knelt and started tinkering with the reactor they'd acquired in Vegas, installing the antimatter containment unit and completing the connections which had been waiting for it. It only took a few minutes, then he stood up again. He wiped his hands against each other. At first, it was the normal 'getting the dirt off after doing something mechanical' gesture, but it became less exaggerated until it was basically wringing.

"Jane..." He suddenly turned to her, looking vaguely feverish, a red rim forming around his eyes which made their blueness pop with startling vividness in his pale face. The effect was almost otherworldly, like he wasn't quite real. "We could do it right now. Open it."

Surprised, she let out a single chuckle, more like an exclamation than a laugh. "What are you talking about? We spent hours planning the test down to the millisecond. Tomorrow-"

"None of it is necessary to see..."

"We can't try it without our observational array set up, without a camera, without Erik. And he's going to see if Darcy can come back with him, because she went through the whole thing with us and she deserves to be here, too, if she can get away for a few days. We can't just try it, I mean, what if it works?"

"Jane," he repeated, his normally smooth and measured voice slightly shaky, almost in danger of breaking, "I made a mistake."

A chill went through her heart. Luke could be melodramatic, but he never wanted to look weak; she'd seen him try his hardest to pretend to be a stoic, and he was still trying. This wasn't about testing her or some insignificant little error he'd made. Even he wasn't so proud that something easily fixable would sound like the end of the world. If the thing was going to work, it couldn't be something to do with the bridge, either.

Her voice was measured when she asked, "What kind of mistake?"

"Jane," her name was nearly a plea this time, "I haven't been entirely honest with you."

She couldn't control her mad giggle of disbelief at that announcement. She covered her mouth, talking through her fingers, "Luke, please. You say that like I don't already know. It's okay. We can talk about it, all right? It's waited this long and..."

He silenced her reassurances by stepping forward and gripping both her shoulders. The touch was
incredibly light, barely enough to register, but it was totally immoveable. She looked up at him in question and was shocked to find a sheen of tears in his wide eyes, welling up against his lashes and making his eyes look even bigger in his thin face. He swallowed hard and drew her gaze to the tendons in his throat, so tense that they stood out starkly against the muscle. He lifted one hand to stroke her hair away from her face with the backs of his knuckles, then turning it over to cup her cheek and- moving as if compelled- he leaned down to kiss her fiercely.

Her mind flailed, screaming in confusion, but she kissed him back. It was the first time he had ever kissed her and it was staggering.

They parted, breathing hard. He pressed his eyes closed tightly, as if to compose himself, and tears rolled down his cheeks. "I..." his voice did crack then, "I was as honest as I thought I could be. I gave you the spirit, if not the letter, of the truth. I did. But I could not... I couldn't do anything else. I desperately needed the employment, I had nothing... and you were essential. I needed you to..."

She fiddled with his collar, suddenly seeing every thread in the fabric, the uneven glaze on the top button. "Just tell me. Tell me whatever it is that's so terrible and then we'll talk about where we go from there."

He nodded, sucking in a breath through his clenched jaw, his cheeks drawn in against his teeth and his eyes on the ground. A tear rolled off his chin and splattered on her hand.

"It can't be as bad as that, really," she muttered weakly, wanting to comfort him, wanting to believe it.

He choked on a shrill laugh at her words. Clearly swallowing it back to keep it from turning into a fit, he kissed her again with bruising force. The hot wetness of his mouth, messy and rough, was gone as abruptly as it had come, leaving her dazed and shivering as the air seemed suddenly frigid against her skin. His hands slid away from her in a feather-light caress as he stepped slowly backward. It felt disturbingly like a goodbye.

Drawing himself up to his full height, he looked her dead in the eye. "Jane, I am..." he paused, hesitating for so long that she thought he had changed his mind about telling her whatever he'd started to tell her. Then, delivered like a terminal diagnosis, he said, "I am a prince of Asgard."

The silence which followed seemed to Jane less like the absence of sound and more like being in the middle of the desert in a howling wind. She stared at him, his expression half-mad with what she guessed was apprehension. Jane herself was frozen in bewildered shock.

"You're a what?"

His face twisted and he sighed defeatedly. "Like Thor."

Her incomprehension didn't lift, her mind not even processing what it meant that he knew Thor's name.

Reading her look- his eyes flicking rapidly back and forth between hers, searching for dawning understanding which wasn't there- he became more and more incredulous. Gesticulating wildly, he finally demanded, "Did he not tell you? Nothing of his life or how he came to be trapped here? Was it not important? That ignoramus, that unimaginable oaf! How could he possibly...!"

Jane could barely hear his ranting over the hurricane in her brain. "Wait..."

"Self-absorbed, foolhardy, bloody cretinous...!"
"Wait!" she was shouting.

He trailed off mid-tirade, his raised hands sank to his sides.

"You know Thor. You're from Asgard. How did you get here? What are you talking about!" Jane's voice was rising in pitch and decibel and she did not care at all. None of this made any sense.

"Your delightful traveller friend was the Mighty Thor, crown prince of Asgard! You said he'd told you about our world, but it is patently obvious he told you nothing," he sneered the word, disdain seeping from his pores. "He was banished to this Realm for insolence and warmongering the very day he was to ascend his father's throne. No doubt he has inevitably been forgiven and now is heir again. I was the second prince, his brother."

She was about to yell that he wasn't answering any of the questions she had actually asked, but the hurricane winds came to a screeching halt as she actually thought about what he did say. "His brother? But... wait. But that would mean..."

Looking massively pained by the necessity, he finally came to the point, "I am Loki."

He roughly palmed the tears from his cheeks. His pallor was like death as he stared at her expectantly.

"You..." Jane's jaw wouldn't work, it felt like she'd swallowed her tongue. "But they said... but Loki sent that thing. That robot thing that attacked them- us- half the town. That thing killed Thor."

"I do not ask you to understand. They committed treason, they would have brought... and he would have...!" practically shouting, he clamped his mouth shut and visibly reigned in his emotions. "You will, of course, despise me now, and so you should, but I must finish the bridge before your hate may-"

"Oh, get off the cross! Explain it to me, then, and let me tell you whether I hate you or not! For fuck's sake." Furious at everything, she shoved his shoulder as he started to turn away from her to the machine. She nearly shrieked in frustration when he hardly seemed to notice her efforts. She grabbed his lapel, yanking on it uselessly, knowing she wasn't strong enough to make him face her if he decided he didn't want to. "No! No, it doesn't just end like that! I'm in this way too deep and that is your fault. This is where you pay the fuck up, you tell me the full truth, Lu-L-"

"Loki," he provided in a miserable whisper as she sputtered impotently on the well-practised pseudonym.

She just stared at him, flushed with anger and on the cusp of crying. "Tell me."

He licked his lips. "Where shall I start?"

"Okay, okay, okay! You be difficult. That's so helpful!" She was hyperventilating. She tried to stop. "I can't go on with this conversation until you tell me if you really sent the giant suit of armour thing and were controlling it."

He was trying to look unrepentant or triumphant or something, but his "Yes!" was a garbled, guttural thing that was half a sob.

The ground dropped out from beneath her feet. "You tried to kill him!"

"I never expected him to die!"
"Oh! Oh, so attacking someone you think is too strong for you to kill is totally all right!"

"I make no excuses! I had to save my Realm and my father's legacy by all means necessary. And my pig-headed big brother, he's never suffered in his perfect, charmed life. He was never hurt, he never got sick, even when we were... I never thought... I just wanted to protect... I never wanted him to be dead." His hands, shaking, covered his face. "He would have killed me if he knew, he would have succeeded in killing me. He still..."

Jane was numb. "He's your brother," she protested, seeing a bigger and bigger black hole forming in her knowledge about both of them.

"He's not," came the answer, both despairing and vicious.

She did not know what to do with that or what to say. She was completely without reference points. It wasn't at all unexpected that he was an alien, it was only a bit shocking that he was from Asgard, but the rest of it was beyond anything she had been prepared for. An unnatural calm settled over her, a grim determination. She reached up, prying Luke-Loki's fingers away from his face. "Tell me from the beginning. I'll listen. I'll listen to all of it."

He summoned up a shadow of a grin and it was horrible. "You won't believe me."

In spite of everything, that made her heart ache. "Try me."
Erik had been well aware that the moment to make a decision was growing ever closer, but he'd hoped against hope to have a little more time. He needed that time to weigh all the risks and benefits, to wrestle with himself about what was right or just or moral. Fate and Jane—impetuous to a fault—Foster were forcing his hand, and he hated it. Naturally a somewhat cautious person, nothing irked him more than being hastily pushed into a course of action which couldn't be taken back.

He'd been toying with the idea of going to SHIELD on his own for months now, trying to get them to check in on Jane without needing to reveal too much of what she was doing. Over the last few weeks, it was becoming less toying and more haggling with himself about how much longer he could put it off. He didn't see how they were that much closer to a functional Einstein-Rosen bridge than they had been right after Thor's departure, but he knew Jane, and he knew she was gathering momentum like a runaway train. That look in her eyes was stronger every day that went by, a look almost like drunkenness or fever. The spring of her mind was winding up, and it wouldn't be long before she exploded into action.

All of his instincts told him it couldn't be worth it to surrender to a bunch of bullies on a power trip whose organisation was the very opposite of transparent, but the danger was becoming so clear and so imminent that he knew he'd get over it. He had to. Even if he couldn't trust SHIELD any further than he could throw the whole jack-booted crowd of them, at least he knew they were on the side of humanity. At least they could put up a token defence if more alien robots came through the bridge. At least they would have the motivation, and he damn well hoped the ability, to prevent Jane's experiment from turning New Mexico into a smoking crater if something went wrong.

Jane definitely didn't have the ability, and Erik seriously questioned if 'Luke' had the motivation.

That Jane could be blinded by the possibilities she saw in the kid didn't surprise him, but it never ceased to disappoint him when she was short-sighted. If Luke had told her his name was Woden or something like it, he was so colossally arrogant that he had intentionally handed her the only clue she needed to realise she couldn't trust him. And he must have told her that, because it could not possibly be a coincidence. Erik had little trouble finding it in his heart to believe it of him. Luke was certainly capable of assuming they would never notice such a thinly veiled reference to Thor; he was not secretive about his confidence that he was the smartest person in the room.

Erik was increasingly livid with himself for taking Jane's word for it when she said she'd researched their mysterious benefactor, but there weren't enough hours in the day for all the things he regretted about the past six months and the shame was starting to outpace the anger. It never would have occurred to Jane to wonder what the name meant or to find out, and Erik should have asked her for it so he could do the checking on his own. If he had, things would never have gotten this far.

Then again, maybe that would have been worse. Who knew how Luke would have reacted if confronted by the information he'd slid under Jane's nose, practically taunting her. Who knew if he wouldn't have tried to take what he wanted by force, if he had any compunction about eliminating...
complications.

A tiny twinge of guilt twisted in Erik's guts at the direction his thoughts were taking. No matter how much he told himself that it was stupid to be taken in by anything that had happened during the time Luke had spent with them, some part of him still wanted to give the kid more credit than to believe he would deliberately hurt them. Admiration for the man's obvious genius and sympathy for his boundless intellectual enthusiasm, mixed with something that was perilously close to fondness, gave him pause in his judgement.

Luke reminded him of a difficult student he'd once had, a lonely young man whose distrust of everyone around him had prevented him from reaching his potential. Erik's careful, consistent intervention had brought out a gentle nature from behind the defensive veneer of hostility. The superficial similarity of Luke's own defensiveness stirred his compassion and his doubts, he told himself, and that was all. Luke was not some damaged college student hiding a history of abuse, he was defensive because he was lying to them and when he was personable, it was because he wanted to use them for his own purposes. That he was sometimes very amusing and frequently made Erik feel like he should be trying to parent him was irrelevant. It wasn't real.

His heart was heavy when he reminded himself of that. Jane thought it was real. He hadn't seen her give herself over to a new person like this since... he couldn't remember a precedent. She always found a reason to keep an emotional distance from the people around her. Even though she threw herself into everything with cavalier bravery, there was a certain point at which her recklessness and openness ended. A certain point at which she would hit the breaks, and that was when relationships threatened to become too complicated and important to be compartmentalised. Erik had been afraid of Thor because he saw Jane becoming smitten with exactly the wrong guy, but that was a crush which had never had time to push her limits. This thing with Luke was, in a very real sense, a truer partnership than she had ever experienced in her life, and she was starting to put the bastard first. She probably thought the attraction was all about the work they did together, she probably thought she was in control, but Erik had known her since she was born and he feared Luke might have managed to circumvent her usual boundaries.

The name was really the moment of truth. The moment Erik knew he would have to do something he didn't want to do. Even if Jane would see it as a betrayal, it was more important that she be kept safe than that she understand his reasoning. Even if SHIELD locked up her research and threw away the key, her life and the public safety were more important than any work. She would forgive him eventually.

The ugly reality was that nothing she'd tried to explain to him about what they were doing had made sense for some time now. It wasn't just that Luke might be helping her research along for his own reasons, reasons which could be very, very suspect. It was that he might not be helping her build a bridge at all. Erik could believe the wool was over her eyes that far, that she didn't see it, and she thought the impossible was possible only because an excellent con-man was keeping her attention divided. Believe it more readily than that their bizarre ramblings were true, certainly. What the device really did, if that were the case, didn't bear thinking about.

However Erik looked at it, he was just as trapped. He had to pull the plug. So he planted an idea in Jane's head that gave him an excuse to disappear on the eve of the experiment, then he called his SHIELD contact to set up a meeting.

Strangely, when he arrived at the operations room they'd set up behind the boarded up façade of Annie's Diner, it looked like SHIELD was already starting to mobilise. All around, the base swarmed with activity like a kicked anthill, and his contact continued to delegate tasks and answer other agent's questions the whole time he was talking to her. His suspicions made his stomach roil,
and he kept catching himself glancing back towards the door, as if he could run away from this now if he tried.

His contact, the Agent-in-Charge at the base, was a short woman with a no-nonsense expression and a close-cropped haircut to match. Her pant suit was so crisply starched, the pleats looked like they could probably draw blood. She introduced herself only as 'Jones'. While she listened to his severely edited report on what had been happening in the lab, she pinned Erik with a steady, measuring gaze from deep brown eyes which seemed to dare him to try anything funny.

He changed his mind three times about whether to tell them that Jane's assistant was probably an alien. He suspected Luke of every evil in his racing thoughts, but he couldn't stop himself from imagining scenarios where he was wrong. Of making SHIELD too jumpy, too quick on the draw. He saw the boy dead on the sand, bleeding red human blood. Background checks coming in showing he was exactly what he said. Conversely, of SHIELD not believing him, thinking he had cracked, and ignoring his concerns all together.

All he could bring himself to say was that they should be armed and prepared for anything.

When he asked about the state of preparation, Jones told him that they had seen the device taking shape on the roof. Erik doubted their surveillance was as hands-off as that or that they'd risk spooking Jane without being sure of themselves, but he said nothing. They probably knew what he thought of them, and he'd cast his lot now. His power over them, if he ever had any, was gone once he spilled his guts. They had probably listened to all the planning for the experiment, and Erik might be ruining his relationship with Jane for no reason.

The convoy of intimidating black vans which headed for Jane's laboratory dizzyingly shortly after his arrival at the base felt to Erik almost like a funeral procession. They might as well be, and the funeral would be for Jane's dream. Feeling morbid, he leaned against the window in his privileged position in the passenger seat of the lead vehicle. He hoped to God he wasn't making a gigantic mistake. The facts were with him, but the facts didn't feel like enough.

He'd left Jane alone with Luke for about twenty-four hours now, since early the previous afternoon. He could only speculate on how far they'd gotten with their bizarre hypothesis, but it must be nearing the point of readiness. The plan had been for preparation to start for the test this evening, if Erik was back by then. The test itself was to begin the following day.

What would have happened? Would SHIELD want to go through with it?

There was no more time to wonder, the short drive was over and the vans were creating a staggered wall of vehicles around Jane's lab. As if she were going to try to escape. That was a laugh. Jane would stand and fight, with her fists if she had to, before she would ever think of running away from her own laboratory.

Erik got out of the car with Jones in time to see Jane rushing forward to meet the group of agents nearest the lab door, Luke a tall, black shadow trailing close behind her. The shouting was already starting.

"And you're not supposed to be interfering in my research unless I ask for your help!" Jane was insisting, her tone bold and annoyed. Erik knew her well enough to detect a slight undercurrent of panic, but he was confident that he was the only one.

"You haven't kept us informed, Dr. Foster, and putting the civilians in the town at risk supersedes our non-interference agreement." The agent addressing Jane was a sturdy guy in a suit, practically indistinguishable from every other male agent present. He spoke in the flat, pointedly reasonable
voice of a man who had worked in customer service. "You have been irresponsible and we are remanding your research to our facilities for your protection and the protection of those around you. We will allow experiments under controlled conditions."

Jane scoffed. "Protecting me! Right, I'm sure. I'm sure it has nothing to do with you spying on me and thinking I'm far enough along that it's time for you to march in and grab the goods because you don't need me any more! Let me tell you something, Special Agent Whatever-Your-"

Luke's hand settled on Jane's shoulder and she jumped slightly before turning to look up at him. The finger which she had been pointing increasingly aggressively into the SHIELD agent's face slowly lowered. She glanced between the two men, then gave an exasperated nod to Luke and took a step back. Erik found the interplay odd.

"Doubtless your intention is honourable," Luke soothed, nodding respectfully towards the other man. "But surely, Agent...?"

"Cartwright," the SHIELD agent supplied automatically.

"Surely, Agent Cartwright," Luke went on without missing a beat, "you realise that imposing upon Dr. Foster in that manner cannot help but alienate her from your cause."

Cartwright folded his hands in front of his body, his face set. "The agency values Dr. Foster's wishes, but public safety takes precedence. The agency does not view enforcement of safety regulations as an imposition."

"Naturally you would not," Luke agreed easily, making a conceding gesture. His voice became inveigling, its lush timbre at its very richest and the lil of his accent at its most pleasantly musical. "But surely it has not been established that safety is at issue? If it were, Dr. Foster would obviously have contacted you and expressed those concerns. You would not, of course, have breached your word that she would not be monitored without her knowledge?"

"The agency-"

"No, that would be an imposition." Luke's expression was conspiratorial as he looked the agent in the eye, like they were on the same side. "And what with Dr. Foster being the only scientist on the face of this earth who has come within a thousand light-years of the discovery your agency so covets, it is essential that she remain amiable. Being the wholesome organisation, responsible to the nation's government that you are, you would never compel an American citizen to actions against their will."

From his vantage point to the side of this scene, Erik could see Agent Cartwright blinking behind his sunglasses. Luke's gaze seemed to go right through the mirrored lenses, piercing even from a spectator's position. Erik had almost forgotten how intimidating the kid's undivided attention could be.

Cartwright stammered slightly as he tried to get back in control of the conversation, and Jones pushed Erik aside and marched over to the little tableau to take charge.

"Dr. Foster," Jones' greeting was like an ultimatum, cutting through the bewitching atmosphere of Luke's speech. She crossed her arms and all of the agents standing near her tensed. "With all due respect to your assistant, we know what the situation is and we know what your rights are. You're still coming with us."

Jane's fists were balled at her sides, colour rising on her cheeks, but she was still trying to keep her
cool. "I don't have to go anywhere."

"I think you'll find we can make you if we have to, Dr. Foster, though I wish you wouldn't force our hand." Jones didn't actually sound like it would bother her either way.

"You promised Thor," Jane accused. Erik swallowed. That was the trump card, he was sure of it, Jane's last ditch effort before she stopped being reasonable. A cryptic reference to SHIELD's diplomatic agreement with a sovereign power, a hint that Jane might know the consequences for breaking it.

Jones' eyes narrowed, her arms lowering to her sides again. "Does he know about that?" She jerked her head at Luke, who was keeping so close that he was practically on top of Jane, looming over the proceedings like a vulture.

Jane's face was an open book.

"You don't think that's a public safety risk?" Jones' grimaced, shaking her head.

Luke opened his mouth to interject again, doubtlessly about to try to talk his way out of this, but Jones gestured briefly and four agents moved to secure both him and Jane while the rest drew- but did not raise- their weapons.

Cartwright was a hairsbreadth from grabbing Jane's wrists when Luke stepped in between them and something happened that neither Erik nor SHIELD had been prepared for.

A bright golden glow seared its way around Luke's chest like a tear in reality, the line of light encircling him fully and then separating into two circles. One moved up towards his head and the other down towards his feet. In the wake of the gold aura, he was changed. It took only a few seconds to move over his whole body before it disappeared, and when it did, the nondescript black shirt and dress pants he had been wearing were transformed.

Suddenly, Luke was dressed in some kind of armour comprised of green cloth and silver mail augmented with gold plate metal that wove closely around his torso to cover his sternum and sides, high boots, a thick green cape which poured over his shoulders and vastly increased his bulk, and a sleek golden helmet with huge, wickedly sharp horns thrusting straight up from his forehead before curving backwards at the ends. In ordinary clothes, he'd been a conspicuous, ominous presence, but in this get up he looked ten feet tall and terrifyingly Other. He reached out and a spear appeared in his extended hand, which he then shifted to a casual ready position at his side.

The SHIELD agents fell back in shock, most immediately raising their guns and some looking to Jones for orders. Jones scrambled backward a couple metres herself, sliding along one of the vans in case she needed cover, but she kept her wits about her and her jaw hardened with decision. She made a quick signal to an agent standing almost behind Luke. The agent went for Jane. Luke twisted to face the threat, his free hand shooting out to seize him by the front of his shirt and lift him up a good three feet off the ground. His legs kicking uselessly in space, the SHIELD agent struggled in that immovable grip like a worm on a hook.

"Don't-!" it might have been Jane who screamed. A gunshot cut the cry short, and Erik stared in disbelief as the bullet literally bounced off the left side of Luke's chest and rolled harmlessly across the sand. Luke reared back and tossed the agent he was still holding at the gunman who'd taken the shot; the human projectile ploughed into his colleague and both men hit the dirt in a groaning tangle of limbs. The others nearby rushed over to check on them.

Erik knew exactly what this meant. Darcy was right. Luke was an Asgardian.
"Mortals," Luke's voice resonated over the crowd, prompting instant silence. Jane was almost invisible behind him, her hand clutching a fistful of his cape where he had just thrown it over her and her face drained of all colour as she peeked out from under his arm. "You have broken an honourable oath pact with the royal house of Asgard, and you have attacked the son of Odin. What have you to say for yourselves?"

Jones edged forward, flapping her hand aggressively at the agents behind her to keep back, then lifting her arms into the 'surrender' posture. Erik's heart was in his throat, the stress like someone pushing on his eyeballs from inside his head. He breathed through his mouth and tried not to go into shock. This didn't necessarily have to get any uglier. It didn't. Thor had protected them when he changed like this, that was a precedent. Luke didn't seem anxious to retaliate for the gunshot any more than he already had. If he weren't too afraid he was becoming hysterical to trust his senses, Erik would swear it looked like Luke was struggling to keep a straight face.

"I apologise. My agent reacted on instinct to a perceived threat. We intend no harm to you as long as you don't harm us. Please identity yourself." Jones managed this speech with the kind of detached, calm politeness that only years of politics could teach. "Are you a representative of the same entity who visited this planet two years ago, and do you intend to negotiate with us in good faith?"

Luke tossed the spear from his left to his right hand, then drove it into the ground at his feet with such force that Erik felt the impact from where he was standing, at least seven metres away. "Should I negotiate in good faith when you have already proven that you will not? You gave your word to the son of Odin and you have broken it. Your people have no honour."

Jones' hands were still up, palms outward, and she pushed them forward insistently. "I can assure you, we meant no wilful breach of our agreement with your... with you. Our understanding was that we were to return Dr. Foster's equipment and allow her to continue her research, which we did."

"And now you would take from her the fruits of her labour and imprison her to ensure your treachery will be unchallenged. Mortal, Asgard has looked upon your race for its entire, brief existence. Do not imagine I am ignorant of your ways."

"Doctor Foster's safety-"

"Is my concern. Do you doubt, mortal, that my protection is sufficient for her and for all those who dwell nearby?"

Erik blinked. His protection? What the fuck is happening?

Jones advanced another few steps. "How can we know without knowing who you are? The deal wasn't with you."

"You made your pact with Thor, my brother. I am Loki, Odin's son."

Erik felt like someone had slapped him in the face. Every voice in his head which would have tempered his reaction with reason and caution and common sense was silenced by this smug pronouncement, and he stalked through the ring of SHIELD agents, ignoring their restraining hands and orders for him to stop. He pushed past even Jones, whose mask of calm was broken by her surprise when Erik walked right up to the dangerous alien and ignored him completely to talk to Jane. He pulled her out from under Luke/Loki's cape by the wrist, too furious even to notice that the Asgardian was watching him and had held up a hand to ward off SHIELD's intervention.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Jane! What the hell do you think you're doing?" Erik couldn't stop himself from shouting. Jane was still almost grey with terror and her eyes were wild and
teary, but he couldn't moderate his worry and anger. "You know who he is?"

"Me?" Jane shrieked savagely when her gaze finally focussed on his face, "What are you doing? With them?"

He just wanted to grab her shoulders and shake her. "Forget them, this- he- this psycho, this alien psycho tried to kill all of us! Do you not remember-!"

"You don't understand," she interrupted, shaking her head, "it's not as-"

"Excuse me interrupting," Jones recovered, ignoring the heated argument, "but who is Odin? I feel like I'm missing some significance there."

Loki leaned against his spear, looking dangerous and regal. "Odin Borson is sovereign king of Asgard, guardian of all the Nine Realms. His rule protects peace throughout the universe."

"So you're a prince?" Jones clarified, "Acting as your father's ambassador?"

"Correct."

Erik ground his teeth, ready to rip someone's head off with his bare hands. He turned to Loki, pointing accusingly. "Oh, an ambassador, are you?"

Jane yanked down his arm, seething at him in a sibilant whisper, "Yesss, he is. He's here with authority to fix this. Fix them!"

Erik wanted to scream at her. She knew that was a lie, she knew he knew that was a lie, and she was trying to order him to go along with it anyway just to save her precious alien resource from SHIELD.

"Are you here to negotiate?" Jones asked again, trying to keep things businesslike. Loki only glared at her and she added diplomatically, "Your Highness?"

The prince tilted his head in acknowledgement of her attempt to placate him, but his expression remained stony. "Should Asgard negotiate with liars? You will break your word again."

"Obviously, I apologise without reservation for what you saw as a breach in our informal treaty, but I submit to you that we did consider it a necessary emergency measure." Jones cleared her throat and drew herself up, trying to amass some gravitas to match with the imposing figure she was trying to address. "On behalf of the agency, I would like to extend an invitation for you to tour our facilities and meet with our scientists and leaders in order to..."

Loki made an unmistakable gesture. Jones stopped talking.

"We are not interested in your petty mortal politics or your primitive technology. This race is under our protection from what lies beyond your world, but you are not our equal. Our interest is in Jane Foster, why is not your business. Your people will contact Jane Foster only when she requests it and will never involve yourselves with her work further than she wishes. You will cease to monitor her laboratory and living quarters. Swear this to me and break your word at risk of my tremendous personal displeasure. Break your word under pain of being held in contempt before the throne of Asgard."

Jones shook her head. "I'm not authorised to-"

"Swear." Loki's fingers gripped his spear and the blade flashed with some kind of power.
"I swear."

"Excellent. You may go."

At a last signal from Jones, the agents regrouped and started to move out. Jane sagged, abruptly sitting down in the sand and resting her head in her hands. Loki watched the vans retreating with narrowed eyes.

"You know that this isn't going to work, right?" Erik demanded harshly, wondering if he was only one who hadn't gone insane. Or if he was the only one who had. "Some parlour tricks and bluffing won't hold them for long. They just said what you wanted to hear so they could figure out how to get around you later and come back ready to do it. They aren't going to leave you alone. They aren't going to let this go."

Loki finally turned to look at him, and he was so much the same and so much different now that Erik knew who he really was. His blue eyes were cold and otherworldly, his strong, finely sculpted features seemed foreign and exotic. He looked older to Erik now, he held himself with a physical confidence that Erik had not noticed before. The majesty which sat on him wasn't idle, wasn't play; this man- this creature- could fight a single-handed war against the whole human race and probably win.

"Of course I realise that, Dr. Selvig. I am not a fool." His voice was different too. Fuller, commanding. He had usually spoken softly before, now he let his words ring.

"What are you going to do to us? What are you going to do to them?" Erik was too wrung out to feel anything, he'd definitely gone into shock. The terror of all this was probably going to hit him eventually, but for the moment he was just tired.

Loki knelt to put a cautious hand on Jane's shoulder. She didn't look up. He stroked her hair and murmured something to her, but he kept his distance, touching her only lightly and leaving her plenty of space to duck away.

"I am going to help you to proceed as planned before they can come back, Dr. Selvig."
Jane was using all of her concentration to slow her breathing, counting the seconds for each inhalation through the nose and each exhalation through the mouth. Her chest ached from hyperventilating, and her head was pounding. To her messed up eyes the individual grains of sand at her feet loomed as large as boulders, the adrenaline rush having her perceiving her environment at what felt like a superhuman level of vigilance.

When SHIELD sailed in to steal all of her research and equipment from her- again- she didn't worry too much that the situation could get any worse than them succeeding in doing exactly that. Not when she was on the eve of her breakthrough, not when the device was built and ready, not when this was the most important moment of her life and they were taking it away from her. But it could get worse.

It had occurred to her that they might do more than just rip her off. They might chain her up in some secure government basement and make her brain just another tool they'd acquired to serve their own purposes. She would have caved eventually, she would have done the work they asked of her; she'd go insane if she just sat in a cell. It occurred to her, but it never felt real. It was almost a joke she told herself because that's how ridiculous her life was. She never believed it would really happen until a SHIELD agent was standing in front of her telling her it was happening, complete with thinly veiled threats about coming willingly.

There was no terror like knowing these people could make you disappear without a trace, there was nothing you could do to stop it, and no one would ever find you. Them stealing her research and setting her up so people would think she was crazy was an almost pleasant alternative, in retrospect.

On the edge of her consciousness, she gradually became aware that someone was lightly brushing their fingers over the crown of her head. She knew instantly that it was him. The sensation of his presence was as unmistakable and luminous and compelling in her mind as a star's corona.

When that SHIELD agent aimed his gun at Luke (Loki, Loki, it was a continual, conscious effort to change his signifier, to redefine his identity), it felt like she was having her own, localised earthquake. When he fired, her brain had momentarily shut down. It was as if time had stopped, someone had hit the pause button on her life, and all she could think was that she didn't want this to happen. The bullet was moving through the air like a boat through molasses, slow enough for her to notice its drag leaving ripples in the airborne dust particles.

This is hyper-perception, she'd thought. Time isn't actually slowing down, Jane, this is just a really traumatising thing right now. You can't actually push him out of the way.

That was when she panicked.

In the present, Loki's hand was smoothing her hair and he was saying something. She heard only the pleasing thrum of his voice, rising and falling with the cadence of the words, the words themselves might as well have been in Greek.

He was alive. For what felt to her like hours that was the only thought which mattered. He was alive.

The bullet hit him square in the chest, right above his heart, and she was numb with shock, then it fell
away on impact as if it were no more than a tossed pebble and she couldn't even be shocked any more. He'd gathered her close to him and draped her with the heavy green fabric of his cape. She was pressed into his back by its weight, the metal of his armour cool against her cheek and palm. He smelled like ozone and rain and she was sure that rang a bell, meant something, but she couldn't think. She couldn't think, but he was alive.

"Keep close, keep covered," he whispered insistently to her under his arm. "It will keep you safe."

After everything he'd told her, she didn't know what to believe or how to feel about him, but in this moment she knew with unshakeable certainty that he would and could protect her from any power on earth.

He was alive, even in the present where she was sitting in the dirt and SHIELD had gone and things seemed to be all right, she could barely accept it. Her fingers found the edge of the worked metal that wrapped around his sides like folded wings and she clutched at the fabric underneath, wanting to feel his body heat and the give of flesh beneath her hands.

A bullet bounced off of him and he was still the same man who complained about her food and leaned on her when he was exhausted and whose jokes were so dry she couldn't always tell when he was kidding. He was still Luke even though that wasn't his real name.

"Jane?"

She counted breaths and the present started to solidify, her field of awareness to widen from its laser focus. Loki was kneeling beside her, frowning at her in worry. She pushed herself up only enough to fall towards him, reaching up and hanging from around his neck in a weak hug.

"I'm so glad you're not dead," she said.

His hand rested on her back, supporting her, but he did not return the embrace. He knew it was the extremity of the moment talking, not real forgiveness. Not real acceptance.

"Can you please get away from him?" Erik's voice rasped somewhere to her left. Now that she noticed him, she could hear him wheezing in leftover fright.

Jane lifted her head to look at the man in her arms, his familiar features sharply framed by the intimidating alien helmet which she was only just now fully appreciating for the first time. He watched her face in return and, reacting to something in her eyes, he reached up and pulled the helmet off. It didn't help her forget what he was, it didn't shrink him back down to manageable proportions. His eyes were so old and so young.

She wanted to kiss him and wanted to hit him and wanted to escape from all of this. She wished it could be yesterday again, just for a few minutes, just so she could properly savour how good it was for a moment while knowing that it wouldn't last.

'\n\n\nI'll listen to all of it.'

'You won't believe me.'

'Try me.'

They stared at each other, the rictus of his forced grin dropping off his face like a discarded mask. The momentum of the silence threatened to engulf them, to lock them in this purgatory forever. Jane
couldn't bear it.

He was like a fucking Russian novel, she thought absurdly. In the sheer amount of conflict and desolation and tragedy glossed over with wordy humour and speechifying, he was exactly like reading Dostoevsky. She walked across the roof to her ratty lawn chair and threw herself down on it. He would follow her, he couldn't help it, she'd challenged him.

"What are you talking about you're Loki, but you're not Thor's brother?" she asked the desert, diving right into the deep end.

His shadow fell over her, but she didn't look up. He needed drawing out and she thought a little distance was the way to do it; she wouldn't live long enough to wait for him to go at his own pace. It was a good thing she'd never had any trouble being violently blunt and detaching from her judgement centres when she was pursuing brand new knowledge from potentially insane evidence.

"You remember you asked me if I had lied to you?" his voice was hoarse, as if he had already been talking a long time. His hands still shook as he pulled the other chair a little further away from hers before sitting down parallel to her instead of facing her.

"You said no."

He cleared his throat, "I said 'not particularly'."

Jane felt her face scrunch up in irritation and confusion, she was getting too impatient and overwhelmed to think clearly. She had to stay in emotional limbo, she couldn't possibly deal with this little Story Time session without being mostly numb. She reminded herself that this wasn't a normal, enjoyable verbal sparring match with her edgy and fascinating partner, this was the person who sent a giant indestructible Deathbot to her town attempting to explain why he felt that was necessary. That did it, the cognitive dissonance was like an electric shock. "What's your point? How much of what you told me is in any way true?"

"All of it. In 'a way'."

Her teeth ground together so hard that it sounded like a steam train chugging through her skull, "Stop being cute or so help me-"

"Thor and I were raised as brothers on Asgard, the sons of Odin the All-father, who is king in our Realm and the sworn protector of all nine worlds of the cosmos." He recited mechanically, as if by rote. "The eternal enemy of Asgard, of all other sentient races, are the Jotuns, the Frost Giants."

Thor had told her about the Nine Realms, had mentioned the name of Jotunheim, but she had pressed him about abstractions and details on Yggdrasil before he told her much about his culture or theirs. He spoke of his father only on a personal level, he hadn't told her who he was or what it meant. All she had to go on as far as external references was a children's book of mythology, and none of it matched up terribly well to what she gathered from Thor. At the time she hadn't known what to believe, but Thor had proved that at least some of what he said was true and that had been enough to be going along with. Jane always liked to think the best of people, where possible. She looked up at Luke (not Loki), and tried to encourage him with her eyes.

"Frost Giants attacked Midgard- that is, Earth- many years ago, and Asgard- my father- drove them back to Jotunheim. That was the last great war. They were our bogeymen, monsters, the simple evil which we dreamt of vanquishing. Do you understand, Jane?"

She blinked- was he trying to distract her from her demands for explanations (again) or was this
really somehow relevant? She decided to give him a chance to build to his point, "I guess like the Nazis have sort of become for us?"

"But they are human, yes?"

She nodded, and he shook his head emphatically, like she'd grabbed the wrong end of the stick.

"The Jotuns are not. They are humanoid in shape but giant in stature, savage, ugly and gnarled, with blue skin and cold blood… their world is one of ice and darkness..." he trailed off, swallowing hard. He looked as though he might be sick.

"Okay," Jane allowed, choosing to believe this could be important.

"Just before Thor's banishment and arrival here, we went to Jotunheim. The fault was mainly mine, I deliberately incited him to it. I never intended us to actually go through- it is forbidden and- but he… I lost control of events."

"Why would you do that at all?" There was so much context she was clearly missing which she would need to decide what to think of his account that she wondered whether it was possible for her to make a reasonable decision to trust him or not.

"I had to. Someone had to. Thor was about to succeed our father and it couldn't be allowed. He was dangerous, Jane, impetuous and foolhardy and petty. He would have plunged the Nine into war."

His eyes were pleading but slid away from hers, his words running together as he hurried to explain, "I never intended…"

She stared at him in silence, utterly unable to reassure him until she knew exactly what it was he had done and what she would be condoning. The image she'd formed of Thor's unseen brother who had been so cruel and the familiar figure of 'Luke' were at loggerheads in her mind's eye.

"It was only supposed to show Father that he was not ready. To open their eyes to his true nature. All our lives, Thor could do no wrong and it was poised to become a matter of life and death that they were so blind to his faults. Their perfect warrior prince was a hot-headed child and he would send the Realm Eternal to ruin."

He was jealous, Jane surmised. He felt ill-used. That didn't mean she could disregard what he was saying, she'd met Thor and she didn't doubt there was considerable truth to the idea that he was spoiled and needed taking down a peg. The question was, how much stock could she put in Loki's perceptions when he was clearly biased? Assuming he was being honest to begin with.

"We went to Jotunheim with Thor's companions, and the Jotuns accosted us. We could have made good a clean escape with no harm done, Laufey- their king- dismissed us outright. But Thor was true to his nature," the seething frustration, the resignation in his voice was palpable. "He killed a giant and started a fight, a massacre at first, but even the Mighty Thor is but one man. The Jotun surrounded us. We all would have died if Odin had not interfered, and I discovered the truth."

He swallowed again, folding his hands over and over each other in his lap. Jane was thinking seriously about running for a barf bucket when his eyes met hers. His fathomless gaze immobilised her, he looked ill and blank and desolate.

"Thor was stripped of his dignities and banished for almost getting us all killed, and for restarting the war with Laufey after there had been peace throughout the universe for our entire lives. And once he was gone, Odin admitted it. The truth."

Jane almost thought he looked frightened, "What truth?"
"Thor is not my brother, because Odin is not my father. He found me on the battlefield when he was stripping the Jotuns of their power. I am a Frost Giant. Laufey's son."

Jane shook her head, reaching her limit on stuff she could just accept, even temporarily, "But-

"He must have changed me then, to make me seem Asgardian. I was a runt and Odin is powerful. He said I was abandoned in their Temple. He had some plan for me, I was yet another weapon in his arsenal, a pawn for his cosmic chessboard," he was raving, his speech jittery and uneven as he tried to bite back reflexive tears. "I spoiled a masterful play, I'm sure. That is, if I was not merely security against his old opponents."

Jane didn't know where to begin. "So you're like an immigrant on your home planet…" she said, thinking out loud, reminded of 'So you see, I am a culture of one'.

Loki snorted at her choice of words. "I am a creature, Jane," he corrected with bitterly cold confidence.

_Holy shit, this is all making so much terrible sense._ Now she remembered another insane thing he had said when she'd asked him why he couldn't have value just as a person: 'because that's not what I am.' She wasn't prepared to deal with this, she wasn't equipped. Her heart hurt. "You're not. You're a person like anyone else."

"What do you know, mortal?" he hissed contemptuously. The veil of anger covering his despair was thin, it lacked conviction. He was fading, she thought, caring less and less about putting up a front for her.

"You. I know you," it was the first thing she'd been sure of in a while. "And I know you're certainly not less than human whatever else you are. Finish telling me what happened."

He let out a breath he'd been holding, his eyes sliding away. Suddenly he pressed on, "Father fell into the Odinsleep, I thought at first that I had killed him. My mother gave me the throne. I was the only remaining heir, but she shouldn't… she should have…"

Jane waved her hand, trying to stem the tide, "Wait. The Odinsleep?"

"He succumbs to an enchanted slumber when the strain on his power becomes too great. Being the custodian of the entire cosmos is a tremendous burden for one mind to bear. I… drove him into it. Unexpectedly."

"How?"

"I confronted him about what I was."

Jane tilted her head, still waiting.

"I shouted."

Why did he have to make everything sound so much worse than it was? "Okay," she said.

"My father's most trusted servant betrayed me. Thor's friends plotted against me. No one accepted my rule, but I... I knew I could prove I wasn't simply a Jotun pawn, I could show my father that I was worthy to be his son. That I could become an honourable warrior, equal to Thor." He licked his lips, edging further away from her. "Father always told us about the great victory over the Jotuns, the peace he established, the good it brought into the universe. Thor declared from childhood that he would finish Odin's work. I formed a plan to make good on that boast."
"What about the thing you sent here? Why did you do that?" She couldn't escape the remembered terror, she couldn't fully invest in anything else until she heard how he justified that.

"Thor's idiot companions demanded I bring him home from exile, of course I could not."

"Because your father banished him?"

He inclined his head in the positive, but his expression was murky, his mouth twitching to one side.

"What else?" she prompted.

"No one had ever anticipated or desired my ascension, I was never a suitable or popular prince in the eyes of Asgard. My hold on the throne was therefore somewhat tenuous, but it was passed to me legitimately by law and custom. If Thor had returned, there would have been those who would wish to see him crowned in my place in spite of Odin, and there would have been those who would uphold the lawful succession and Odin's final commandment."

"Civil war," Jane concluded, easily picking up what he was implying. He acknowledged her with a tip of his hand. "Why did you say that Thor would kill you?"

He drew his hands into his lap, scowling down at them and starting to worry his thumbnail again, "Did I not just speak of his oath to destroy the Frost Giants- every one?"

She pushed at the air between them in vehement denial, shaking her head, "He would never..."

Loki's eyes were penetrating. "No?"

"I knew Thor," Jane began, ready to go to the mat over this.

"For three days," Loki finished for her with an air of clinical finality. "He was my brother, Jane. How well do you suppose that I know him?"

She lowered her head, slightly chastened by his undeniable point, but she was still sure of her instincts and willing to bet on Thor. "He changed a lot while he was here, I saw it happen. Even if he would have done it once, and I'm not saying I believe that but even if, he wouldn't now."

"I could perhaps be forgiven if it was not a gamble I was prepared take with the safety of the known universe at stake."

Jane thought that was a cop out, but she didn't think he needed her to tell him that. "So how did they end up here?" she steered them back to the subject at hand.

"Asgard's gatekeeper was willing to commit treason based on his dislike and distrust of me, and he did. So did they by taking advantage of it. They went to Earth to bring Thor back after I forbid it and ordered the bifrost remain closed. The Destroyer is the King's enforcer, I sent it to prevent their return. Traitors are subject to death or exile. It would have been exile for them if Thor had remained mortal, but it seems Odin never intended for Thor's banishment to be permanent. Of course not."

She knew that part of the story. "Something happened with the hammer."

"It deemed him worthy of his former power and restored his strength and title." He sounded tired.

"What happened when Thor went through the wormhole?"

"He interrupted my plans to annihilate Jotunheim and its monsters finally and forever. We fought. Thor destroyed the bifrost to save the Jotuns."
So that settled one big question. If Thor could have come back as he'd promised, he would have. Jane was too detached to know how that made her feel at this point. What to think about giants and monsters and the blatantly questionable nature of Asgardian politics, she had no idea. If Loki was telling the truth, he had attacked his own race because he thought they were beasts and repudiating them would make him a real person; there was no way she could tackle making sense of that even if she could believe it. "How did you get here?"

Loki smiled at her and it sent a chill down her spine. She almost reached for him in spite of everything, wanting to do something- anything- to wipe away the utter hopelessness, the sardonic apathy, which she saw behind his eyes.

"I fell into the broken bridge."

She studied him, knowing there was more and knowing he was so far gone that he would tell her absolutely anything if she just let him talk.

"I let go."

"You mean-"

"I wanted to die."

That agreed totally with many of her suspicions about him, but the confirmation still hit her like a splash of ice water. "But how-?"

"I don't need a bifrost to travel between worlds. I am a magical prodigy, gifted beyond all reasonable expectation, it's very likely I am second as a sorcerer only to Odin himself. Of course, it is honourable for Odin to be wise, it is cowardice for me. It's ironic no one wanted me because of my lack of more traditional virtues, as I could have been so useful to whichever people would have me."

His eyes rolled up to the sky overhead, a sour twist to his lips. "I had thought it would be the last time I needed my skills, just to die in space somewhere away from... somewhere else. But instead, I landed here and I survived."

There was far too much to say to that, so Jane decided to start with the biggest problem, "Magic?"

"Of course, Dr. Foster. You have observed it enough."

"There's no such thing as magic, Luke. I know you have very advanced technology and Thor thought he had to describe it that way for me to understand, but there isn't really magic."

"Isn't there?" He leaned over and reached behind her neck with both hands, then he was tucking a scarf around her throat which hadn't been there before. It was transparent and delicate as spider silk, glimmering between different shades of purple and green with flecks of sparkling white. It looked like the Northern Lights.

"You pulled that out of your sleeve. I'm not five." She crossed her arms. All of her awe of him, her insecurity, could his whole technical genius be explained away as simply a well-prepared con using products of his superior culture? There was no way and she knew it, but the thought nagged at her because it was still an easier thing to believe than that her entire world view needed to be realigned again. Or more like overhauled. Thor and the hammer and the wormhole she could slip in, she could shroud with Clarke's Law, but if there was genuinely supernatural magic that wasn't just tech she didn't understand yet, she would need a stiff drink and some therapy. If he was that much smarter than anyone she had ever heard of and had bona fide magic powers, what chance did she have of ever catching up?
He swirled his index finger in the air, dark purplish smoke forming a ring around it, then solidifying into a gold bangle. He picked up her hand and slid the bracelet onto her wrist. It was heavy and undeniably real, carved with straight runes which reminded her very much of his peculiar handwriting. "After everything I've told you about magic, Jane, can you really pretend ignorance?"

"You never told me about magic."

"Oh, did I not? What do you imagine I've been telling you all this while? Magic is will. To exert your will on the universe is only to acknowledge that your will exists, or to accept and use the downward causal efficacy of the conscious mind, if you must. The childish materialism which has crippled the minds of so many of your great scientists is very easily overcome, Jane. This," he turned his wrist and a set of silvery blue throwing knives appeared between his fingers, "may be beyond the reach of mortal power, but your people ought to have learned by now that their intentions can shape the world even when their actions are small.

"You, of all humans, Jane, should know that your will is the greatest single arbiter of your success or failure." He threw the knives, one at a time in very rapid succession, into the blacktop of the roof in the pattern of a star. It lit up with blue flame and burned bright lines into the backs of her eyelids. "I suspect I am here because of you."

She shook her head. She couldn't process all of this. All of her frames of reference were useless. "How much of... of any of this has been you?"

He raised an eyebrow at her, a casual wave of his hand causing the star and the knives to disappear. "What do you mean?"

"The breakthroughs in the lab, the science, how much of it was really you and how much of it is...?"

"I could have opened a path and left this Realm at any time, but that does not mean I knew how to build a bifrost. You understand combustion, that does not mean you could go into the laboratory and build a car out of scrap. I haven't misled you, Jane. What would it profit me?"

"What does any of this profit you!" her head ached, she was going to have an adrenaline crash soon if she wasn't already having it.

His jaw jutted and he looked down.

"How can I know what's real about any of this?" she asked herself more than him.

"I had to learn from you, Midgardians approach the world entirely differently and at first I could do nothing with your tools, your elements, even your first principles. Our physics is not expressed like yours. We don't use metal wires and bits of silicon on Asgard, but it was simple to incorporate your approach once I had read your theories and watched you work. I hardly needed to pretend anything, though I admit to a great deal of withholding. Everything I told you was... part of the truth. You were the only connection I had left in the universe, the only one who could tell me what had happened to Thor. I am no one now and..."

"Oh yes, right, you're a monster."

He practically crackled with energy, his glare dangerous. "Do you mock?"

"Something so stupid and pointless and melodramatic? Yeah! I do!"

"Will you absolve me then, Jane Foster! Will you pardon me the blood of my kin on my hands and a madness I cannot be certain was wrong? My father is a destroyer of worlds and he is a hero, my
brother is a slayer of Frost Giants and he is the beloved prince, and I walk in their footsteps and I am a monster. Born of monsters and monstrous for wishing to be otherwise! I saw evil in it, but I am not to be trusted because I have never been what they are or what I should have been, I still see evil in it, yet I know not how my actions so differ from theirs! It is my birth that makes me wrong, and it is my greatest sin that I failed to end this miserable farce that is my life. They were all right to call me coward, if I were not I would -"

She screamed at him, wordlessly, just to make him stop.

Panting, he shook his head, like he didn't get what her problem was. "I will never be worthy. Before I fell, Odin... I know that now."

"I don't give a shit what your father said to you-"

"I killed him myself, my real father-"

"Shut up, I know what you're doing!" She grabbed him to anchor herself, hearing stitches pop on his jacket as she yanked on it. "Your society is a mess and you being a misfit, you obviously knew it. Thor was a big asshole and you could see it because of point one above, but he wasn't a bad person inside and neither are you. Okay, I don't know what we're going to do, but you are not going scare me away and you are not going to kill yourself. You're not going to kill yourself."

Leaning away from her like a caged animal, he looked hunted and hysterical as his eyes darted between the machine and her fiery stare. "They know of the bridge. SHIELD. It was a momentary lapse, but I let them hear and it was enough. They will come."

Her mouth dropped open, her grip on him going slack.

"If you would join them against me, I should like to know now."

Jane fought down the very strong urge to punch him in the face, figuring she would probably break her hand on his jaw anyway, and squared her shoulders. "Not today."

Now stop trying to distract me, I am so on to you and it's not going to work. I only start things I intend to finish.

"Get away," Erik's voice echoed, like they were underwater.

"I'm staying with him. He's staying with us." It might have been better to say 'staying with me', because she didn't know if she would be including Erik in anything for a long, long time, but she could clarify that later. She could scream at him later. She could finish feeling betrayed later.

Right now, she was busy passing out.

Between being up all night trying to make sense of a very complicated man and his alien society, no food since the previous afternoon, almost being kidnapped, and thinking she was going to watch him die, she could not find a single atom in her body prepared to fight the fact that she was going to black out against Loki's chest.

Chapter End Notes
I hadn't intended to show quite this much of Loki and Jane's conversation, but a lot of you said you wanted to see it. I hope it turned out okay.
"Jane?" her name slipped out almost involuntarily as she drooped towards him, starting to fall awkwardly across his lap.

Loki caught her and cradled the back of her head with his arm, tilting her face towards his with his free hand. Her eyes did not flutter and her breathing was smooth and slow, her strong pulse beating sedately beneath the skin of her cheek. He could not be surprised to find that she had fallen into such a faint after the night they had passed. She had drowned him in a tenacious onslaught of judicious inquiry such as he had never experienced; though it did remind him uncomfortably of being caught in a compromising position by the Queen and facing her lethally patient dismantling of his attempts at obfuscation.

The questions had lasted through the entire afternoon, the evening, the night, and far into a new day. Until the imminent arrival of their unwanted visitors sent her into a flurry of panic, her weariness had showed no sign of getting the best of her. Jane had slept little for weeks and hardly ate, so great was her abstraction as she worked on the bifrost, and he had spent days half expecting her to fall ill. He was impressed at the stamina of her frail mortal form even as he grew concerned that she would exhaust herself before completing her task.

No, it did not surprise him that she had now reached the end of human endurance, but he found he was surprised at how much he disliked to see her felled by mere circumstance. He recognised such power in her, such fortitude, it seemed contrary to her dignity to swoon from anything less than a mortal wound.

Loki could almost laugh at his thoughts; bitterly, at any rate. It seemed he was still a son of Asgard in all things but his cursed blood, not half so able as he had once imagined to escape the near-sighted, hard-headed values of his upbringing, and somehow he had begun to think of this tiny Midgardian woman as an honourable warrior. In character and temperament, she fitted the bill perhaps better than he did. How funny.

Jane sniffed in protest as he laid his fingers across her forehead and tried to decide if her pathetic flicker of an aura was normal or not. Her eyebrows pushed together in a slight frown when he let a minute thread of magic press against her mind, but she did not wake. Her unconscious will instinctively tried to repel the invasion and this satisfied Loki that her sleep was ordinary and nothing to concern him. He supposed her anger at SHIELD and frustration with their impertinence had taken the very last of her energy. She would recover with some hours rest and a substantial meal. Then they could resume their plans to open the bridge.

Loki still could not guess what he would do when it was opened, having no notion of either what he ought to do or what he wanted. When he allowed his mind to wander down that path towards the inevitable confrontation with everything he had left behind, his suspicions and fears of what might be found there rushed and shifted with such speed that rational thought was impossible. His heart beat quickened and his steadiness abandoned him even at the slightest glance in that direction, so he left it lie. He had never had an end in sight for this endeavour, never knew what he hoped to gain from its pursuit, but the pursuit had quieted his mind and so he had gone on in blind obedience to that which granted any fraction of peace. He had become a creature of the present moment.

He slid his left hand beneath Jane's knees and drew her upper body close to his breast, then stood with her in his arms. Her head fell against his shoulder, her breath stirring his hair so that it tickled his neck. He suppressed a shiver, turning his chin to avoid a recurrence. He couldn't escape her scent, recognising the light lavender perfume of the soap she used to wash herself combined with the sweet
smell of the cream she put on her hands, and it filled him with discomfort that he knew such intimate
details of her ordinary life. She would not have welcomed him into her home or her confidence if she
had known what he was. If he had not used her curiosity against her.

He started to walk towards Jane's strange quarters, the single chamber in the metal tube which served
her for every purpose. He had slept rough and stayed in many odd places when he went adventuring
with his brother, but Jane's boudoir struck him as one of the least suitable accommodations in which
he had ever seen a civilised creature dwell of its own free will. He hadn't bothered to find out if
mortals lacked regard for decorum in general or if Jane were a special case, but now he wondered.

Erik Selvig was following him, he observed, having almost forgotten the man's presence. His focus
on Jane and lapse into wool gathering had silenced such trivialities as rambled accusations. Perhaps
he was losing his sharpness, as there was also the business of his dropped guard allowing SHIELD
to eavesdrop when it was most inconvenient. If he was, he decided, it hardly mattered any more.
There was no damage left to be done.

"What are you doing?" Selvig's voice wobbled, the apparently terrific strain of the day adding the
weight of many years to his already slouched frame. He trailed after Loki with hunched shoulders
and a halting step, his hand held out as if to pull Jane out of Loki's grasp. "Leave her. Leave us.
SHIELD will be back- you can't..."

Loki turned, lifting his eyebrows in exaggerated curiosity. "What do you suppose they can do, Erik
Selvig?"

Selvig flinched away as if in fear of attack, his mouth working soundlessly. How utterly appropriate
and predictable. They will all come to see the truth and they will all shy away.

"You saw how effective their weapons are- or rather, are not- against me, and you must have some
notion of my capacity as a warrior. You watched the battle between Thor's companions and the
Destroyer, which I should say was quite enough for a demonstration. So I'll ask again, if I decided to
use force, do you really think they could stop me?"

"They have more than just those weapons, than just conventional weapons. I've heard of clandestine
projects in development-"

Loki sighed. The movement of Jane's breath creating slight pressure against his chest was pleasant to
him at this specific junction in a way he could not define or articulate, but it could ease only so much
and he was very tired. "Erik Selvig, if I came to this planet plotting secret harm to your people,
would those to whom I exposed my identity and who dared attack my person have left here alive? Or
was that this protection of theirs acting on me- very clandestine indeed, so much so that none of us
perceived it."

Selvig's eyes dropped to Jane, his fleshy chin pressing on his collar as he tucked his head. His hand
still warded Loki off, as if Loki intended to rush him, as if he could do anything to prevent it. The
overwhelming desire he felt to take the woman he saw as his charge away from the danger he
thought she was in was obvious.

Loki sighed again, letting his eyes close for an instant of quiet despondency. That determined yet
helpless twist to Selvig's lips, the fierce and wary look in his watery blue eyes, the wrinkle of caring
on his brow: this worry had a distinctly paternal character.

Loki sometimes thought of Volstagg when he looked at Erik Selvig, something about that cautious
shiftness and amiable grumbling put him in mind of the feckless, formidable figure which had been
such a fixture of his adolescence. Volstagg was much older than Thor's other companions, a man
grown with lands and family to tend. He was jolly and good for a fight, but he had long lost the true berserker fierceness of youth, and he was quick to remind them that even the highest nobility could gamble and lose. Death and dishonour would not respect their small years or their exalted status.

Odin had likely tasked him with minding the heir didn't get himself killed, to risk being called a coward by a beardless boy for his king's sake. But while he might have begun the acquaintance with duty to his king, his first loyalty had long been to Thor. The love he bore for the prince was that of a subject and a brother in arms, but it also had something akin to the love he bestowed on his many children.

Which was why Volstagg had risked his life and his family's station, had thrown away his service to Odin's throne, only for the slightest chance of Thor's return. The fat fool had no such love for the other prince. Patience had always been too great a boon for the second son to ask, so much less anything more than that.

Loki licked his lips, reburying things he wished had not surfaced at all, and tried again. "I have no quarrel with humans, SHIELD perhaps excepted. I would have no quarrel with you, either. I sympathise and would likely have done as you did in your place."

Erik looked stunned, but said nothing. It was impossible to guess at the nature of his astonishment, though Loki found he still cared to try. Perversely, it mattered to him what this tetchy mortal thorn in his side might think. The prince felt growing certainty in his conviction that the norn who had come to his birth to direct his fate was the most capricious creature in all eternity.

"I won't strike first whilst I'm here, you have my word."

Sputtering and gesturing, Erik looked like he couldn't decide what to object to first. "You won't... you nearly levelled this whole town! An ambassador! What kind of horseshit snake oil could you have possibly peddled to Jane that she would ever consider taking your side against SHIELD knowing what you are? You- you- and the absurd, the ridiculous crap you're still trying to sell me who isn't... isn't... Loki's not even Odin's son!"

The eerinesses of the landscape was like a shadow seen from the corner of one's eye, the unsettling feeling of not being alone, of some lurking incorporeal unknown. The winds swirled over the broken tundra and through the jagged remains of monolithic stone carved structures, howling and whispering by turns, freezing you to your bones.

Everything was dark, murky, shrouded in gloom and ice. Blueness seeped from the emptiness and into your blood.

"You've come a long way to die, Asgardians."

The gravelly rumble of that voice, like the rock falls accompanying it, seemed without beginning and without end. An echo of grinding earth, of stars cooling and worlds forming. This desolate planet, so old that its ages dragged on the feet of those walking it.

His hands trembling in front of him as he struggled to hold the Casket of Ancient Winters without hurling it away in denial, without dropping it in disgust. Shivers of dread making his knees weak, planting his feet and squaring his shoulders to hide all of this from the all-seeing eye he could feel upon him.

"Am I cursed?"

"What do you know of it!" Loki's own demand sounded shrill and childish in his ears. There was no
shame beyond his reach, there was no depth of degradation to which he could not sink. If the bloody humans knew of his nature, it seemed foretelling of his fate had preceded his very birth here among the least of the Nine. *Everything is written and the snake swallows its own tail.*

"They're only stories! I don't believe them and I don't believe you! Whatever you are you're no prince, you're no ambassador, and you're no friend to Jane. We're not so helpless, we're not playthings for you aliens to come toss around at will. We will stand up to you, whatever you're planning."

Suddenly he didn't care, the fathoms to which he did not care could not be counted. "Erik Selvig, you vastly overestimate your race's importance. Your world survives because of Asgard's honour alone, because of your colossal helplessness. You would find, if you were to challenge the place you hold in the universe by making your death more honourable than your life, that- amongst the powerful- compassion is not a grace granted to folly."

He turned to continue toward the trailer, Jane's weight so slight that she hardly seemed substantial. She hardly seemed real. Perhaps she was not. Perhaps he was still falling in space, his magic was now expended and no longer protecting him, the lack of oxygen conjuring all of these preposterous affairs in his dying brain. Perhaps he had merely dreamt the entirety of this second life on Earth. It would be considerably more in keeping with an orderly universe than the alternative.

It certainly seemed more in keeping with life as he knew it that he was dreaming rather than that Jane had genuinely decided not to aide her people in his capture, that she had suspended her judgement upon him. She knew enough now, her good sense knew enough to overcome her curiosity and to make the reasonable choice.

No woman would embrace him as she had. After everything he had told her, still she fell into his arms with apparent trust.

What did it signify, he wondered, if he dreamt of himself so enslaved to the whims of Thor's pet mortal that her inexplicable trust that he would not hurt her consumed him with ratifying pain.

"Anything to avoid admitting it," Erik spat from behind him, weaving in his steps as he tried to decide between keeping his distance and taking a stand. "Anything to keep from taking responsibility! It was you who attacked us, the other Asgardians did everything they could to protect this town- Thor went to his death!"

'I could have done it, Father! For you! For all of us.'

*Was I right? Isn't this what you wanted?*

'No, Loki."

His father's voice changed in his memory from a whisper to a sneer. He remembered it slightly differently every time, every thousandth time these words rose again to batter him with recriminations when he became tempted to lay blame anywhere other than at his own feet. But he was simply wrong. It was not Asgard which was faulty, not the All-father's teachings, it was Loki.

*Odin's one, piercing eye and its unerrring judgement flayed him naked of pride or illusion or hope. He had been found wanting- why was he still alive? With oblivion encroaching the courage had come to ask, to expose the pitiful truth behind his ambitions, to call down his father's discernment and discover if there were anything the monster pawn could do to become a son. To erase his nature, to be more than a useful pet. He had asked and he had received his answer. Why couldn't the fall have killed him the way it should? And now he was ruining Jane's life the way he had*
endeavoured to ruin Thor's.

Such a fool, thinking anything his bestial mind could conceive or his tainted hands could effect would be the right thing. Asking at all was arrogance. Of course he was wrong, of course nothing would make him worthy. If his reason could be trusted he wouldn't be this thing that he was.

He had not been passed over unfairly. There was no injustice. How many times must he realise this.

There was a stinging wind rushing around him, his hair flying in his eyes and dust swirling into miniature storms at his feet. Jane whimpered and he nearly dropped her in his haste to release the hold which had become far too tight. Her skin was hot where he touched her, doubtless it would bruise in an exact shadow of his grip. The wind ceased abruptly as he regained control, and Loki looked up at Selvig's now bloodless face in anguish that he had betrayed himself so thoroughly.

"Take her, take her from me." He lifted Jane out towards her would-be protector, as far from himself as possible. Her limbs fell limp, her head lolling. She was defenceless, utterly defenceless. Why had she not pushed away from him when she felt the darkness coming, why had she no sense...

Erik stepped forward, then stopped.

"I shouldn't be in her chambers, I have not been invited," Loki babbled, desperate to cover his sudden change of mind, desperate to pretend he didn't fear his own strength. And it was true enough. He had no right to impose on her, a private dressing room was verboten without express permission. The only women's closet he had been inside was his mother's, when he was too little for it to matter. "Take her."

"I can't," Erik said, looking miserable. "My back won't have it."

Loki looked down at Jane, a wrinkle of disapproval at being jostled about so much appearing on her brow. Her sleep was growing lighter, the dead faint passing. She might wake if she was disturbed any further. Loki chewed the inside of his cheek, hating to be trapped in this nonsensical comedy of embarrassment. He couldn't die or live with dignity, it seemed.

"Did the Destroyer target any humans?" he asked suddenly. He had watched from the throne, but his recall was somewhat fragmentary. Idiot, shameful tears were gathering in his eyes. They would not fall. He would spend ten thousand eternities damned for a coward before he humiliated himself any further.

"What?"

"The machine which came-"

"Not... not really, I guess." Erik sounded very uncertain, as if he had not thought about it and couldn't comprehend the turn of the subject.

"I was acting as a king when I sent it here. Its mission was to prevent Thor's return to Asgard. None of it concerned your people or your world."

Jane's voice from somewhere around dawn echoed in his head, *If you're looking for absolution, I can't give you that. No one can. I can't tell you all this stuff will be okay or if it's fixable. I can forgive you and maybe I will, but don't ask me to be your keeper. It's for you to decide whether you need to make it up or what that would be.*

"I am here for Jane, Erik Selvig. That was never a lie."
In what capacity he was 'here for her' had always been an entirely open question. Whether to punish her, to understand her, to use her... it was never to admire her, but now he did. There was a time he could have hurt her, might have hurt her without conscious thought. She was a lifeline, a touchstone which he might have destroyed in some childish fit. Then what? A cold hand seemed to grasp his heart.

"I swear by this day that, while I live, she will be safe from every harm. And my life has shown itself very far from amenable to ending. In this, I lay my sword at her feet, and I will be gone if she asks it of me."

Erik ran a hand over his thinning hair, leaving it in a disarray which Loki found slightly painful. When they had spent all night in the lab, arguing good-naturedly about the stars and about the limitations of Selvig's perspective on the world, he had often looked thus. Sometimes, when he admitted defeat, he had smiled wryly in Loki's direction. As if they shared a joke. Sometimes there was almost something like acceptance in his manner, something akin to warmth.

But camaraderie was ended. There was a sour, uncompromising twist to Selvig's mouth.

"You will not be consulted. Your opinion has already been noted," Loki added waspishly, regretting that he had succumbed to his compulsion towards justifying himself. "If you disapprove, you are free to go and join your new allies against us. Jane is forgiving, I doubt she would scorn you indefinitely."

Selvig huffed out a breath, his hand clutching his brow even as he shook his head no. "I think she'd forgive you for plotting world domination or God knows what long before she'll even consider forgiving me."

Loki had no notion what to make of that assessment.

"Let's get her to bed," Erik said tiredly.

Erik Selvig held the door open while Loki cautiously manoeuvred into the tiny stairwell, careful not to bump Jane's head or knees. Inside, it was as cramped and dark as a cave, and he could not stand to his full height under the curving portion of the ceiling. It was awkward to stoop in armour, so he folded it away again into a pocket of magic, his less restrictive Earth clothing taking its place.

He glanced back and forth, only locating the bed the second time he looked to his left. Jane's few articles of furniture filled every available bit of space, almost hiding it from view. Clutter abounded. Loki felt a blush creep up his neck when he saw Jane's under things draped over the bench which served as her dining room table.

Was that permissible, he wondered, to leave her intimates strewn about in the open even in her own quarters? She had only one room and it was hardly private by the standard to which he was accustomed. As a child he had been often in the company of girls, but his childhood playmates had all been brief companions, separated from the princes as they entered training for service as ladies in waiting to the high nobility. He knew none of them long enough to ask such things when he was sufficiently innocent to do so with impunity. Except Sif. And Sif hardly counted. Exposing weakness (Loki considered this ignorance a profound weakness) to her was like showing one's jugular to a lioness.

He was laying Jane down on her bed when he caught sight of the astrolabe which he had made for her. It hung on the wall beside her pillow, right in the place to which her face would be addressed if she slept on her side. A thin chain had been looped between the plate and one of the faces to hang it, and it looked as though she might mean for it to also serve her as a pendant.
He thought of Sif's pin, never worn. Not prized.

Jane's thick eyelashes made long shadows on her cheeks in the column of light which broke in from the open door. The beauty mark by her full mouth perfectly offset the symmetry of her elfin features, but the effect seemed subtler with her fierceness quieted, her powerful mind occupied by dreams and rest. He gently lifted her head and drew her hair back over the pillow so that it would not tangle beneath her or disturb her if she shifted. He watched a moment as her breast rose and fell with her breath, catching hold of her wrist to feel for the aura of her life energy again.

She was well. He should leave her. He did not belong here in her sanctuary.

He looked at the astrolabe and bent over her hand to kiss her fingers.

"Sleep peacefully, Jane Foster. Sleep the sleep of the charitable and the just."

He went outside and Erik Selvig watched him with blatant speculation.

"What if that thing you two built actually works? What do they think of you back at your place?"

"I suppose we shall cross that bridge when we come to it, Dr. Selvig."

Erik frowned, his nose crinkling with disgust. "Was that a damned pun? Did you honestly just pun at me?"

Loki said nothing.
Recognition

It wasn't until she realised that the sound in her dream which had been a robot maid she'd built to do the dishes yelling at Luke and Erik for making a mess in a series of angry beeps was actually her cell phone's snooze alert that Jane even knew she'd been asleep. And that she was now awake. Sort of.

She slid her hand along the crack between her mattress and the wall where her phone typically ended up, because she tended to pass out with it clutched in her fist while lying to herself that she was totally going to get up and plug it in. Remembering little daily tasks like that wasn't a strength of hers. But the phone wasn't in the crack. She frowned in defeat and tried to snuggle so deeply into the warm, comfy softness of her bed that the shrill beeping would no longer be able to reach her. Something hard dug into her hip.

Finally, she admitted defeat. Turning the light on, she paused to curse a bit and blink rapidly until she could see again, then noticed that she was still fully dressed, her phone was still in her pocket, and she could swear the last thing she remembered it was barely after lunch time. Had she been drinking or had she really slept for eighteen hours straight?

Her head throbbed and sitting up caused an alarming wave of dizziness. Oh yeah, food wasn't optional, was it? As if on cue, her stomach gurgled unpleasantly and seemed to roll over in her gut. She puffed out her cheeks and blew her hair out of her face, waiting for the sensation to pass so she could make an attempt at standing. Someone was going to revoke her 'adulthood' privileges one of these days. It wasn't like it was entirely her fault this time, there were circumstances beyond her control.

SHIELD had raided her and been turned away by aliens. Again. She didn't think a little flash and intimidation was going to be enough the next time, either. Diplomacy had completely failed until they saw they wouldn't win with force and might be called upon to justify themselves to someone they couldn't make disappear.

A stab of pain behind her eyes had her shuffling towards what could charitably be called the trailer's kitchen, where she pounded down some aspirin and water, then started in on a box of granola bars. She slid gracelessly into the bench at her dining table and sat chewing and trying to collect her bearings.

She was pretty much screwed in the long term at this point. SHIELD showed every intention of snatching all approaching discoveries from her grip as soon as they were close enough to breakthrough to be worth something. Jane wasn't entertaining any illusions that they would permit her to publish her findings, not with the way they jumped on her before she could run any tests which might attract attention. They had their motives and their motives weren't conducive to letting her go along with hers. If a star-walking superbeing didn't stand, armed and dangerous, between her and them, she would either go underground in chains or she'd be left to become the crazy desert crackpot laughingstock that everyone always thought she was.

Erik had betrayed her confidence, had decided to go over to the other side in spite of his massive animosity for them because that's how little he felt he could trust her judgement. Chock up one more concurrence with the crackpot diagnosis. He must think she was a silly girl, him who had always pushed her to follow every bit of data all the way no matter what; when she did, he told her it was a wild goose chase. And clearly it wasn't that he figured out the truth about Luke, because he'd sure thrown a freak out when Loki finally resorted to giving his name. She wondered if Loki resisted so hard for Erik's sake or if he resented having to identify himself in general. It was obvious why he hadn't wanted her to know, but she would have thought the damage was more or less done from his
perspective once she did.

Maybe if Erik had figured it out, she’d be more understanding, but he hadn’t and she was so disappointed in her mentor. The sting of rejection that came with the realisation wasn’t quite logical and it wasn’t something she was proud of feeling, but the wounds from grad school and begging for this grant until she made a spectacle of herself were still fresh. No one in her field seemed to have any faith in her and she knew they were wrong, she’d gotten the crap kicked out of her reputation because she was that sure they were wrong, but it ate away at her anyway. No one thought she made good decisions about her work, even the man who half raised her, the one person she thought she could count on to encourage and support her.

Well, she would still be in the right even if Einstein and her father both came back from the dead to tell her to stop. The disappointment, that was the emotion she should keep feeling, not rejection: disappointment and anger. Erik could have and might yet ruin everything with his meddling, he’d put them in more danger and could easily have set the whole human race back from the lip of world-changing progress. Hell, he could conceivably have started some intergalactic incident if Loki weren’t bulletproof.

God, that bullet, she couldn’t get over it.

The horrible moment of understanding when she knew he’d been shot, then the paralysing shock, and her silent plea for this to just not happen somehow seeming to work. She’d see that thing bouncing off of him with vivid clarity for the rest of her life if she lived to be one hundred. It was more insane than watching her life’s work sail past her in the street in the back of a truck, more dismaying than seeing Thor take a robot backhand and go down like a tonne of bricks. Something the very man she cared so much about had deliberately caused.

Her heart seemed to hiccup in her chest at the guilt of that thought. Fuck, what had she gotten herself into? Maybe she couldn’t be trusted with her own best interests, but that was her problem, that was her thing to figure out or let go or whatever she had to do. Erik’s total absence of faith in her as a professional or a scientist, that wasn’t something she deserved and it wasn’t something she could look past. Even if she needed saving from herself, the Earth didn’t need saving from her (she was more confident of that than ever, thank you very much), and going behind her back to the shady black ops assholes who had proven they didn’t respect her was never the right answer.

Granted there was still the lingering possibility that she really was crazy (if she wasn’t hallucinating from lack of sleep, she would have to come to terms with the existence of full-on magic eventually), but she would think that the man who raised her to climb every mountain could give her the benefit of the doubt for one lousy experiment.

Wait, how did she get here? She’d made it through most of the box of rocky road granola bars plus a banana and her brain was sputtering back to semi-functional life. She definitely hadn’t gotten to bed under her own power. Her imagination supplied her with a ridiculous image of Loki floating her around on an invisible board like a stage magician doing a trick. She shook her head, annoyed that her mind was still wandering off into flights of whimsy when there was so much serious shit she hadn’t begun to process.

Would they just go on? Just carry out the test they’d planned?

Well, Erik wouldn’t. He was officially uninvited. She experienced a stab of discontent that he wouldn’t be there at what would probably be the greatest moment of her whole existence, wouldn’t see her triumph over all the obstacles she’d faced her whole career, wouldn’t share the euphoria of the accomplishment with her and tell her Dad would be proud. Especially, she hated that he wouldn’t be there to be proved spectacularly wrong first hand, a surrogate for every scoffer and doubter who had
tried to tear her down.

But she couldn't be childish about this. He wasn't safe or trustworthy enough to get anywhere near their future plans. He couldn't be there. It was his own damn fault he couldn't, not hers.

Jane's lip wobbled and she sniffed haughtily to herself, refusing to cry over this. She pulled her sweater up over her chin and closed her eyes as she slid down the bench, lifting her knees to press against the edge of the table. If it was weird that Loki was still her partner while her lifelong mentor was on the outs, she didn't care. Nothing he'd done was a betrayal, that was the difference. At the thought, she realised something was a little off about her attempts at deep, calm breathing, something was making her insides twist slightly with a flutter of nascent emotion.

Her shirt smelled like Loki.

She remembered the hug, remembered fainting in his arms like some squeamish Victorian lady (though she'd more than earned the right to black out at that particular juncture and she refused to be embarrassed about it). Her imagination wasn't quite so addled as she'd thought, she guessed. He probably didn't float her around with a magic wand wearing a top hat, but he had almost certainly carried her.

She tugged the sleeve of her sweater up over her hand, pressed her face into it and inhaled deeply. Rain.

More or less fully awake, fed, and loosely speaking freshened up, Jane stalked across the parking lot towards the lab in a state of high dudgeon. She glanced up and stopped before making it half way. Loki sat cross-legged on the edge of the roof, his elbows resting on his thighs and his hands clasped in front of him. In normal clothes again and taking this disarming posture, the full impact of his true identity was softened by mundane familiarity. He pleated the cuff of his black jeans between his fingers as the wind stirred the dress shirt he wore, whispering down the open collar and lifting the fabric away from his rigid frame like a sail. By all rights he should be freezing, but Jane highly doubted he felt the cold any more than he had seemed to feel the heat back in summer.

It was so easy to accept that he was not of this Earth at the same time that it was really, really hard. She watched the tiny, repetitive motions of his slender fingers and thought of the latent power in his long limbs. The pull of the wind outlined the hard musculature of his lean build, but this suggested nothing of his real strength. He took up enormous space in her life, she thought, more than even someone of his stature needed.

Just behind Loki, Erik was standing over him like a vigilant watch dog, staring at the back of his head with wild attention. He looked absolutely dead on his feet, his face weathered and severe with fatigue. The idiot was probably up all night, guarding someone who wasn't going to do anything and who he couldn't have stopped anyway. All this to protect her? She wondered.

Neither of them seemed to notice her, so she gathered her wits about her and made for the stairs to the roof. When she let the trap door fall open with a heavy clunk and stomped out into the sun, Erik jumped about a mile and Loki's subtle fidgeting stilled. It figured she couldn't surprise him. A gust of wind tossed his hair into his face and he ran a hand through it as he turned only enough to catch a glimpse of her, peeking out the corner of half-lidded eyes as if not looking directly would limit his exposure to whatever reaction she decided to have to him now that she was rested. She frowned in contemplation at this slight shrinking, wanting to pick at him, knowing he was going to be slippery
and that time was running out for satisfying her personal curiosity, but first things were first.

"You," she accused, pointing at Erik, "you're not staying. Not in my lab."

Loki's head whipped around fully now, his eyes wide.

"Jane," Erik started, his tone placating and his hands spread out in a conciliatory gesture.

"Nope," she said. "You're not part of this project any more. You're not in the loop any more. I can't trust you."

Erik's mouth flapped soundlessly, his cheeks flushing a dangerous shade as he stared at her with pure incredulity. "Me! You can't trust me! What about him!" He waved both arms frantically in Loki's direction, like he couldn't possibly overemphasise how ludicrous it was that he needed to bring this to her attention.

Loki swallowed and the nervous emptiness of his expression as he watched for Jane's response, the anticipation, made him look gaunt and ill. She had never understood why he, self-important as he could be, was always so passive about being discussed like he wasn't even in the room, but it was fine with her for right now. There were only so many fires she could put out at a time.

"This isn't about him. This is about you and me." She put up her hands to stave off interruption. "Erik, I never for one second thought that you would go behind my back like this, I never suspected you thought that little of me after everything we've been through. I know you worry and you've known me since I was born, but this is my life! And I really thought you understood. I really thought we had a professional respect for each other as well as a personal relationship, but we clearly don't, so we can't work together. If you can't even follow my lead for one experiment in my lab on my work, then what does that say?"

Erik was dumbstruck, he shook his head in flat denial of everything she was saying.

"This is about him," he thundered, his Swedish accent thicker than she had heard it in years, "you knew he wasn't who he said he was, you knew he knew things he shouldn't know, and you refused to consider the danger you were putting- not just you, but this whole town, maybe the whole planet-"

"Yeah, I did know, and I made a decision! It was my decision to make!"

"And you were wrong!"

"How was I wrong?"

"He tried to kill us, all of us, he's worse than I ever thought!"

Loki, who had turned to watch the argument, crossed his arms with precise, pointed movements. "If I had tried to kill you, Dr. Selvig, I would have succeeded. We've discussed this."

Jane whirled on him with a violent 'zip it' motion. "Excuse me! Asshole sarcastic comments are not helpful!"

"Merely a statement of fact, Jane," he drawled, suddenly cocky.

She wondered if him showing some spirit again out of nowhere was a good sign or not, but she was too angry to give it much thought. She stalked closer and leaned down beside him to threaten, "Help me out here, okay?"
The intensity of his steady, measuring gaze caught her like a fly in a web, the world melted away and there was only the steel in his eyes. "It will do no good to use reason. Nothing I say, nor nothing you could say for me, will make the slightest difference.

"Isn't that right, Dr. Selvig?" he raised his voice, his tone almost jovial.

"Please stop," Erik begged, rubbing his eyes rather harder than Jane thought was advisable. "All night with this."

"And here I supposed we were reaching an understanding, even a tentative agreement." Loki almost pouted.

Jane looked between the two of them, more than a little mystified. Erik was definitely pissed, but the mood swing fairy seemed to be blessing them all equally because the bluster had gone out of him. And if she didn't know better, she'd swear Loki was teasing him.

"What are you talking about, an agreement?" she asked, hating the idea that she was already out of the loop again.

Loki sprang to his feet, sliding one hand into his pocket and looking nonchalant. "I commiserated with Dr. Selvig, sympathised with his motives in going to the mortal defence organisation, and I said I would tell you so. Not that I expect to change your mind, Jane, but some leniency of action would surely be appropriate."

"You actually want him here for the experiment?" she said, incredulous. It wouldn't change anything, but she couldn't believe that was what he meant.

"I didn't say that."

"He's just playing mind games, just… Jane, can't you see this is rolling the dice on lives? You've got to realise that he's only out for his own gain. Whatever that is." Erik dropped his fist, which had been rising to pound his palm in emphasis, when Loki grinned at him. "He's trying to keep you off balance, from seeing what's really going on."

Jane smacked Loki in the chest as he opened his mouth again, ignoring his affronted glare. "What is really going on according to you?"

"He wants to use you for something, who knows what!"

"I've told you, Erik Selvig, that my wish is to assist Jane in opening the bifrost, I've also told you that I do not need its power to leave. I seem to recall you offered me whatever you could give without endangering this world if I would agree to do so in the night without alerting her to my departure."

Jane made an undignified snorting sound at this, clasping her hand to her forehead in frustration. "Erik, stop trying to make decisions for me. Seriously. Right now I'm only kicking you out of my lab, don't make me kick you out of my life. You," she poked Loki in the stomach, "stop antagonising him."

She fell through a moment of profound unreality as he grinned at the admonition, the interaction striking her as amazingly petty and normal. She was touching him still, feeling the firm spring of muscle under her finger, exactly as if he were human and just Luke and just… but he wasn't. He was warm and near and touchable, yet he was something beyond her grasp. She looked up into his eyes and saw that he sensed her abstraction, the sparkle of mischief going out in his face. He had felt normal for a second too, she realised.
What must Asgard be like?

"How much time do you think we have? Before SHIELD comes back?" she asked, gripped with the anxiety of reality intruding.

Loki shook his head, making her ache to slide her fingertips across the elegant curve of his cheekbone and into his wonderfully messy hair, to run her nose along the line of his throat and kiss his pulse. He looked so beautiful and so sad and she wanted to keep him. "Not long."

"Wait for them, Jane," Erik pleaded. "I'm not trying to control you, I'm afraid that..."

"You're just as afraid of me being right as of me being wrong. Go. We're fine here. We've got work to do." She crossed her arms, deliberately shifting to stand shoulder to shoulder with Loki. "I'll call you when I'm ready to talk to you."

Appalled, Erik shook his head vehemently. "Jane, you can't be serious, you can't be alone with..."

He gestured at Loki again, as if words failed him to describe their latest alien house guest.

"I've been practically living with him for months and nothing has actually changed. This isn't about you protecting me and me being stubborn, so don't pretend it is. Besides, it's not like either of us could take him in a fight. You're being ridiculous."

Loki tutted in distaste. "As if such an encounter could be called a fight. An Asgardian infant would not be greatly troubled by your efforts."

"Rude and unnecessary," Jane snapped, not in the mood to take it lying down. "I'm scrappy."

"You are formidable in many arenas, Jane Foster," he agreed smoothly, "but you could not even lift a sword."

"What about a gun?" Erik put in nastily.

"Oh yes," Loki lingered on the sibilant hiss of his last syllable, revelling in it, "such useful weapons."

Erik grimaced, caught out for forgetting the recent demonstration of how very effective firearms weren't. Jane still had that uncomfortable churning in her gut at the reminder of it, too unsettled even to begin to resolve the experience. She let her arm brush Loki's and wasn't at all ashamed that he caught her doing it because he'd said he wanted to die, and she couldn't live with herself if she didn't try to change that.

"No more dick measuring contest," she announced, ignoring the offended male looks this prompted. "Erik, go home. I'll be downstairs getting back to work."

As she was making her way down the narrow steps she heard Loki say, "Surely she means your home in the village?" in what was nearly a reassuring tone and barely stopped herself from glancing back to see what mask of tragedy had fallen over Erik's face in order to prompt this attempt at encouragement from such an unlikely corner. She didn't need to feel bad about this, but it sent unnameable tinges of emotion through her bloodstream that it seemed like maybe Loki did.

Not to mention she was sure that he wasn't being patronising, as Erik would certainly assume, he really did understand choosing to break a trust for the greater good. That was, after all, what he said he had done to his brother. Of course, he didn't pretend it was a martyrdom, which was the thing she found most irritating about Erik's attitude.

Maybe she was too forgiving on one hand and too stubborn on the other, but the verdict was still out
at this point. She considered herself to be allowing the evidence to shape the hypothesis.

She surveyed her lab and her semi-organised chaos of work and research and plans like a brooding tiger checking over her cubs. She needed to reassure herself it was all here, that SHIELD hadn't been able to get in and steal anything, that no one was going to sabotage her or take things out of her hands. She didn't know if she regretted the pang of suspicion that Erik might have tampered with something, but she probably would eventually.

She plunked herself down at a table and kidded herself she was pouring over the carefully constructed schedule for the bridge experiment which she would now have to rework. Really, her thoughts were still turning over and over, for once refusing to focus themselves on the stars.

It must have been some time she sat there, because when she noticed Loki's hand leaning on the desk at her elbow she startled so hard that she bit her tongue. Turning, she found his face close to hers, and he sprang backward.

"You seemed asleep with your eyes open," he explained, sounding mildly apologetic and moderately defensive.

Jane stretched and yawned, blinking her dry eyes. He was right, she guessed, she'd been staring down at nothing while she was lost in her thoughts. She watched him, taking in the elegant lines of his causally regal stance. He didn't work at it, at least she was reasonably certain he didn't, but he often looked like he was posing for his portrait. "So, Thor when he was here was about to become some supreme cosmic referee and king of your home town, but he got knocked all the way down to nobody for being a jerk?"

His eyebrows lowered and his eyes narrowed, she could see him trying to anticipate how she wanted to use his answer against him. He was so paranoid. "Is that not what I told you?"

"I like to double check, I'm a scientist. I guess it explains his attitude problem." Jane shrugged. "It's not that I don't believe you, you know, it's just really hard to believe."

He cupped one hand in the other in front of him like he often did, his left thumb under his right so he could worry the nail without drawing too much attention to the fact that he was doing it. "I was raised a prince all my life, and while I have always felt the burden of that privilege, it has never seemed extraordinary that it was so. It simply is. Or it was. Chide me not again for saying it, but truly I am nothing now, and I cannot bear your mockery when I plainly state an unalterable fact."

Jane frowned, looking down and away from him. "It doesn't feel real to me. Any of this."

He made a non committal noise in his throat, his mouth a thin line.

She stood up and carefully put her hand on his arm. "Do you still want to open the bridge? Were you going to point it at Asgard when- I mean, is that what you wanted?"

His big blue eyes still had the power to hit her right in the heart even after everything. "I don't know what I want. What I wanted. I could have gone to Asgard at any moment once I recovered from the fall, but... I have no place there to go back to."

"Thor's punishment was temporary, maybe your father-"

"You don't understand," he clenched his teeth on the last word, his lips pulled back in a subtle snarl. "I was never his child, I cannot be his heir; Laufey is dead and I can have no further value for him."
Thor is not the favourite son, he is the only son. Of course we must be treated differently."

"Loki," she admonished gently, interrupting his rant before he could spiral. His real name felt alien in her mouth, but his face relaxed fractionally at her use of it and she was glad she'd made the leap.

He sighed. "I have no notion what they would do with me now."

She chewed her lip a moment. She was standing very close to him, not having moved away as her hand slipped off his arm. His looming height didn't feel annoying or intimidating to her any more.

"My thoughts of the future ended with ensuring your bridge was operational. Once it is opened, I can imagine no further."

"Why?"

"I had a small wish to know what you had done to Thor and I needed an excuse to be near to you. I was making a bid to pretend there was still some sense to be made of the universe for me, nothing more tangible."

Jane shook her head, smiling sadly. "I mean, why can't you imagine the future even if you don't have a long-term goal yet? You're such a planner."

"I won't. Scout's honour."

He cocked his head ironically at her use of a turn of phrase she knew he couldn't possibly recognise, but he took the intent behind it easily enough. "The man I thought that I was, was never born. What's left is a wandering spirit without past or destiny. Worse than a shade. What am I to do with this life which is not mine to live and which has no purpose? You were a thin tether to a home in which I never belonged, yet for which I could not help yearning."

Jane held her tongue, tempted to break her promise a little bit. She didn't think he'd take it in the sense that she meant it. She would never get how he could hate himself so much and still be so vain.

"Learning is a purpose," she suggested gently.

"On Asgard?"

"On Asgard?"

A muscle jumped in his cheek as his jaw clenched.

"Yeah, exactly. Who cares what they think if they'll never accept you, anyway? Honestly, sweetheart, either let the place go or don't, but make up your mind."

They both froze at her unthinking use of a pet name, something she had never done often but found herself doing more and more when she was affectionately exasperated. Jane felt heat rising in her cheeks that she'd forgotten all the reasons she shouldn't be that intimate, forgotten she had no idea what she was okay with when it came to her feelings for him. Everything was too close, too familiar for her to keep the new reality in the forefront of her mind, for her to remember she needed to maintain a sensible distance. She could still have compassion for him without throwing caution completely to the wind.
"Sorry," she muttered, not sure if it was a good idea or if it would make things worse.

Loki wouldn't look at her. She wanted desperately to know what he was thinking and he was denying her the opportunity even to guess.

Taking the hint, she moved along, "What do you think will happen if we turn the bridge on just to see if it works?"

"I doubt the bifrost has been repaired. Not if it is to be rebuilt as it once was. They will have a limited ability to take any action at all," his accent seemed sharper, crisp with formality. He was disassociating again, switching off. "They very likely believe me dead. It is possible Heimdall has noticed something amiss, or that he was watching when I allowed my guard to drop."

"Heimdall? Thor yelled that a couple times. Is he like a security guard?"

Loki smiled at her choice of words. "Just so. He is a man who can see whatever he would turn his gaze upon, be it on the far side of the universe. Asgard's gatekeeper. I'm certain he has been watching you. I disguise myself as a human where possible, but he may have deduced the truth if he has looked while I was blocking him completely. He knows of no one else who can shroud his sight."

Jane, a little lost, told herself to swallow the magic stuff for now and worry about it later. She nodded with what she hoped was a sage expression.

"You truly mean to go forward with me, Jane Foster? Just as we had planned?"

Well, she was hardly about to start being sober and practical at this stage of the game. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Do you not fear me even now? Fear at last that Erik Selvig is right and I do have some nefarious trick winding up? That I bide my time to turn upon you?"

"Acting based on fear has never got me anywhere I wanted to go. I'll never know if I don't take the chance."

"On occasion, Jane, you provide me with miserable insights about why you and my brother found such accord in your short time together."

She waggled her finger at him. "He said as if it didn't just as easily explain why I get along with you. Not charging in guns blazing doesn't mean you don't take big dumb risks to find things out just like me. Calculated risks are still risks. You're the one hanging out here, the only place anyone would ever look for you, so you can satisfy your curiosity. I've got infinitely more in common with..." she trailed off, suddenly thinking about what she was saying.

"I am not impetuous," Loki complained, letting her off the hook.

She felt again that urge to touch him, make contact, to slip her arm around his waist and hug him tight, to show him that she poked fun at him because she understood. Because she liked him. She put her hands in her pockets and didn't call him on his contrariness and didn't tell him how full of shit he was. It was so hard to resist falling back into the easy swing of their relationship before she had found out the truth, to remember not to tease and push at his barriers as if nothing serious were at stake.

"Okay," she breezed by it awkwardly. "Well, come help me re-rig our test set up now that you're not withholding. Then I should probably call Darcy."
And he certainly wasn't withholding any more. Her brain was shorting out trying to follow as he went over the composition and properties of the Asgardian materials which allowed the short beamline and spun her particles into spirals without loss of velocity, this time free to tell her about how they were made. The runes he'd avoided translating for her the first time, he now explained channelled and entrapped the will of a sorcerer, permitting the permanent infusion of magic into the inanimate.

Jane couldn't help her continuing efforts to comprehend it as something that fit into her world, something she would be able to explain as technology with some hitherto undiscovered wrinkle of quantum mechanics. Loki seemed to find this approach endearing, but he had no sympathy for her futile quest to turn magic into science.

"Dark energy has nothing whatsoever to do with it, Dr. Foster, though it has its own uses."

She rubbed her temples and tried again to grasp his lecture about where 'mortal science' ended in the atom smasher, 'Asgardian science' began, and how 'simple magic' wound its way through both.

He'd told her he didn't need to pretend to be slower than he was when they'd worked through these things originally, her way, but she was feeling less and less inclined to believe that.

"I was hobbled by the necessary moratorium on magic at even the most basic level. Imagine being asked to build a complex mechanical system without the use of your right hand, to describe stellar dynamics without calculus. Magic is as intrinsic to my thought as mathematics is to yours."

She did call Darcy, but she spent a lot of time holding the phone away from her ear and the conversation ended with an ominous command to 'not do anything too Jane until I get there'.

Jane told Loki they were going ahead ASAP. They had probably one more day if Darcy was serious, and Darcy had sounded pretty serious.

They bolted the bridge machine to a massive piece of reinforced steel platform which Lucio from the junk shop assured her weighed in excess of a metric tonne (but which Loki carried around like it was made of cardboard- she now felt moronic for doubting him when he said could move the server without help), and drove it out to the bifrost site.

"It will make it easier. It could be done from the roof as planned, if you prefer," Loki had said, uncharacteristically sanguine. She thought changing the test site was a good idea regardless of what was easier. Not that they would exactly be hidden, but they would at least be slightly less obvious.

He buried the platform in the sand, shoring it up with artistic waves of his elegant hands to which huge quantities of earth responded as if the sand were part of a symphony he was conducting and which also seemed to alter the chemical composition of the dirt as it settled into place. Nothing was going to move now. Except the van, which she backed a good thirty metres or so away. Just in case.

It had been three days total since the confrontation with SHIELD and Jane was uncomfortably convinced that they were cutting their window of opportunity very fine even rushing headlong into things like this. When Loki asked again if she was certain she wanted to go on, she nodded decisively. If this was a huge mistake, she was long-since committed to making it.

The observational array was fully online in the van, taking up every single atom of space in the back except a tiny niche with a stool for her to sit on that barely cleared the door. The machine was ready and no one was here to bear witness except the duplicitous alien who had somehow become the most important person in her life.
She gave him the signal and they went to their stations, hands hovering at the ready to make adjustments. She knew how to open her own personal rip in the fabric of space-time. She understood. She still needed Loki's superhuman abilities to make cheap antimatter in order to run the equipment as it currently stood, but she, Jane Foster, knew how and she'd jumped the last hurdle without any help. Her brain was steering this ship, these were her designs.

"You're going to work," she told her creation under her breath, "and everyone's gonna know it."

With a terrific crack, a pulsating and glorious beam of light and energy exploded into the sky; it looked almost like a double helix made of lightning. Sensors chirped all around her, but she couldn't tear her attention away long enough to heed their readings even though her eyes were dazzled by the brightness. Almost as soon as it appeared, the vortex vanished. Her vision spotty, she jumped out of the van's open back door and dashed towards Loki's position by the machine. He threw his hand out at his side in warning, making her stop short.

A man stood, looking dazed, in a rough circle in the sand. He was tall and fully encased in ostentatious golden armour and a menacing, oversized helmet with stylised, geometric horns. By his clothes, his sudden materialisation, and the way he thrust a spear out in front of him, she could guess he was an Asgardian, too.

"What mortal dares?" the guard? soldier? demanded, coming closer and sticking his spear out threateningly towards Loki's chest.

Loki grabbed it with both hands, rolling it towards the other man's body and yanking it out of his weakened grip, all too fast for Jane to completely follow how it was done. The Asgardian drew a dagger and readied another battle stance, but his expression became a mask of utter shock as he looked his opponent in the face.

"Imposter! Show yourself!" he shouted.

"What Heimdall witnesses, the All-father judges, and never to go unpunished are crimes against the son of Odin," Loki recited in a strange cadence, his voice reverberating in a way that shouldn't have been possible in the middle of an open plain. His own resplendent garments seemed to gather around him and coalesce from light, his intricate woven armour and his towering, crown-like helm.

The Asgardian's mouth fell open and he seemed momentarily paralysed, then his fist snapped to his chest and he dropped to one knee. "I implore Your Highness to pardon me."

Jane's brain, usually a pretty reliable source of useful observations, supplied her only with the staggeringly unhelpful thought, 'Holy shit, he really is a prince.' Of course, she knew that, but she hadn't known that. The unexpected confrontation with the proof was just the last straw on her coping skills, it defeated her rationalisation impulse. His airs and the aura he sometimes had that came perilously close to inducing an emotion like awe, it was all pointing to this incredible, fairytale nonsense that was the truth. She had been hanging out with genuine, bona fide alien royalty and it wasn't just a scam on SHIELD or on Erik or anyone else. People bowed.

Inexplicably, this made some things easier to understand. She felt inclined to look at Thor and Loki and their hang-ups with greater charity.

"It is forgiven, einherjar, you knew me not. I assume the All-father has acknowledged my death?" Loki asked, his magisterial tone seeming exactly appropriate in a way that it never had before.

He nodded.
"The crown prince? He believes in it also?"

"He was said to have received a sign this past fortnight, Your Highness. A white feather fell in his footprint."

Loki twisted the stolen spear between his hands, his mouth twitching to the side as he thought over this- to Jane, totally cryptic- response.

"Fetch him," Loki said with sudden decision.

The einherjar, whatever that was, appeared to stifle an instinct to glance up in surprise. "The prince your brother, Highness?" he sounded uncertain.

"Yes. Go to him directly." Smoke seemed to emanate from Loki's hands and swirl around the shaft of the spear, which glowed slightly. He tossed it into the sand at the einherjar's feet like a javelin. "Give him this, but tell him nothing, waste no time. It will bring him here to me. I require his aid."

Nodding so sharply that his chin seemed to bob on his chest, the guard only had time to grab hold of the spear before the bifrost was activated, apparently by magic.

"I think it is farewell for us, Jane," Loki said softly as he turned to her with a wistful smile, his cape swirling about his heels. From being every inch the majestic titan seconds before, he suddenly looked like a boy playing dress up. "I ought to have known it would end like this. Perhaps I did, really.

"I am a frightfully good liar."
Jane- torn between the mounting euphoria of the successful experiment, confusion about pretty much everything else, even more shock to add to her collection, and total exhaustion- just didn't have any chill left.

"What the hell are you saying to me right now?" she demanded, ready to scream if he tried to be coy.

Loki, the son of a bitch, actually laughed. It was a bitter, half-hearted laugh which caught in his throat, but it was the principle of the thing. "Do you know, you have the most patient impatience of any being I have ever encountered. So impetuous and you're still too reasonable. It's almost infuriating."

"I'm infuriating?" she repeated incredulously, so offended she could barely get the words out.

He smiled, but it had a terrible hollowness and he was developing a thousand yard stare which set off alarm bells in her head. She might have to bodily jump on him to stop him from doing something dumb or irrevocable or both any second now. "In the best possible way, Jane. I shall miss you. If missing is permitted to me."

"What! Loki, so help me, start making sense right now or I'll punch you until you feel it if I have to break every bone in my hand. Stop shutting me out and talking in riddles! God damn it, I've done everything humanly possible to show you that you can be straight with me and I'll listen and I'll be able to handle it. Pay me back! I've earned it."

He shook his head. "You think learning is the ultimate pursuit, that there can be no such thing as too much knowledge, but I tell you that there is much that it is better not to know. There is much I wish I had never learnt. It would have benefited me greatly to be less curious. It would also have benefited you."

"If this speech is leading up to you disappearing in a puff of smoke and never coming back because you've somehow convinced yourself that's for the best, I want you to know that I will find you and that is a promise. I will invent magic detecting radar. I'll build a fucking space ship. Loki, look at me, believe me when I say this: I will find you."

Looking at her as she'd asked, he seemed wistful. "Nothing so civilised as that, I'm afraid, but you'll see."

Jane crossed her arms to keep from wanting to shake him. "How is this goodbye, then? You said you didn't have any plans for this part! I'm real tired of being two steps behind and you being mysterious when I thought we were done with mysterious."

"I really do apologise," his voice had been wearing rough these past few days, but now it seemed to wrap her in a cocoon of velvety warmth as he let pretences drop and the careful distance evaporate from his manner. That forced edge of rasp he seemed to think he needed disappeared as he tried to comfort her, his tone ringing with the purity of sincerity. "I'm so sorry, Jane. I had some foolish notion that this inevitable moment could be avoided, at least for long enough for me to make good on some of what I'd meant to give you."

She felt her face contort bizarrely as she tried to figure out what her dominant emotion was. She never had managed to cleanly win one of these little verbal fencing matches, she only ever broke his guard by throwing her metaphorical épée at him in frustration. When he really decided he wasn't
going to tell her something, he simply wouldn't and she was lucky if she even noticed. She didn't know whether to be proud of herself for recognising the plays or to be angry that she still couldn't effectively counter them.

She was thinking about what to say, how to balance acceptance and chastisement so she didn't make him clam up before she could find out what the hell he was about, when there was another portentous crack through the atmosphere, a cascade of writhing light, and a shower of sand. She threw up her hands to shield her eyes, far enough off to be only sprinkled with dirt as she was battered by an eddy of swirling air. Excitement warred with trepidation as she peeked between her fingers, but there had always been a disparity between the power of those two forces in her character. She was already making her way closer to the landing site before conscious choice entered the fray.

It was Thor. Dressed much as he had been when she'd last seen him what felt like decades ago, his armour glinting in the sun and his hammer gripped at his side in his right hand. He tossed his hair out of his face as the wind died down and immediately caught sight of her.

Jane lifted a finger in protest, suddenly thinking three hundred things at once and wishing she had learned her lesson about throwing herself headlong into these situations. Profound uncertainty slammed down like an avalanche on the heady victory of conquering interstellar travel, burying her in doubt and fear and awkwardness. How was Thor going to react to any one of the things he was about to be confronted with? She couldn't predict his behaviour at all, and her former confidence that it would all work out fine when it happened was revealed to be the empty rationalisation with which she'd wilfully blinded herself because she had to get that bridge open.

Thor's mouth spread into a broad grin as he recognised her, his eyes crinkling with an untroubled happiness that made Jane's heart clench. He took two steps in her direction before a glimmer of unease started to sneak over his expression as he noticed the look on her face. Glancing around questioningly, he seemed to spot something out of the corner of his eye. Before she could say anything, he turned to investigate and looked full at Loki.

Thor's skin drained of colour, the hammer slipping from his hold and dropping to the ground with a dull thud. Slack jawed, he shook his head slowly as if in denial of what he was seeing, his eyes wide with shock.

Loki waited with his arms at his sides, his back painfully straight and his chin lifted. He was biting the inside of his lip, his cheeks sucked hard against his teeth; with his prominent bone structure and his eyes shadowed by dark circles of fatigue, this taut and forced expression practically transformed his face into a death's head. He was clearly doing everything in his power to hold himself rigid, to keep from flipping his shit in one way or another. She could see the tremor in his fingers, the strain of unnatural stillness.

Jane was opening her mouth to intervene in the stand off when Thor went for his brother like a pouncing lion. Loki flinched involuntarily as he tracked the decision, recognised the coming advance the second before it started.

She suddenly understood exactly what he thought was about to happen and why he had stalled, refusing to tell her what he expected even though he seemed to be at his most honest, and the sheer weight of the knowledge dragged on her body, tried to suffocate her. He was so perceptive and so blind.

Loki leaned away, in danger of staggering backward as Thor bounded towards him in two huge strides, but he stood his ground and stared down his nose defiantly, pulling haughtiness around him like a cloak and leaving his hands pointedly loose at his sides.
She wanted to-

But Thor was there already. He clasped Loki's throat with one hand while his other arm swung around his brother's back and pressed him to his chest in a crushing, suffocating hug.

"W-what are you-?" Loki's teeth chattered as he forced the words out, caught between bafflement and outrage.

"Brother," Thor lifted his head, showing the tears gathering in his eyes, "I thought you lost." He thumped Loki's back, his grip only tightening, Loki's armour audibly shifting against itself under the pressure. "In the first days we thought perhaps there was a chance… but Heimdall could not see you."

"I know how to shroud his sight."

Thor's grasp on Loki's neck suddenly seemed a lot less benign and affectionate to Jane, his thumb moving to press hard up into Loki's jaw as he held him at arm's length and forced him to meet his eyes. "You hid?"

There was a flicker of something in Loki's face, then he laughed as dry as dust. "Of course I did. Don't dissemble, brother, it has never been one of your strengths. Ask me what questions you would, whatever you were told to if the chance arose, and then do what must be done. Be quick about it, my destiny has waited a long time past its due arrival."

Thor's brow creased in confusion, but he wore a forbidding frown that showed a hint of teeth. "You let me think you dead all this time, Loki, and for what? What destiny? Is this more madness? More petty vengeance?"

"Don't play the fool!" Loki said so harshly that it sounded painful, "I should have died shortly after I was born in the wretched wasteland where I was spawned, and you, O great prince of Asgard, are here to set things at last to right. Do it!"

Jane bit her knuckle to keep from interrupting, needing to see what they would say. Thor wouldn't really hurt his brother, she was sure. Completely sure. A little well of blood touched her tongue. She bit harder.

"Loki..." Thor whispered, obviously appalled. "Despite all that has passed between us, and my anger only slumbers, brother, you cannot expect that I would..."

"Did he not enlighten you, explain what he'd done? Did the All-father not tell you what I am?" just shy of screaming by the end of his sentence, Loki's eyes were bright with tears and something very like madness indeed.

Thor retreated by a fraction, his hands falling limp. "Naturally, he did. Naturally I would ask what had happened to my brother that..."

Loki seized on the advantage, shoving Thor back and following him as he stumbled, neatly reversing their earlier position. 'I'm not your brother, I'm Laufey's son, a Frost Giant! Heir of Jotunheim!' He laughed hysterically at that last epithet, like it was the best joke he'd ever heard. "And you will hunt the monsters down and slay them all, won't you, Thor!" He pointed to the hammer where it stuck out of the sand. "There was nothing you ever liked better in your life than the feeling of their ugly, misshapen skulls shattering under the swing of your arm- you told me so yourself. I may wear the mask of a man, but you know in truth I am nothing of the kind, so live up to your name, Giant Slayer."
Panting, Loki grabbed Thor's forearm and guided his hand to the fallen hammer, forcing him to wrap his fingers around the handle and lift it up to tap Loki's temple with the edge of the weapon's head. "You know I can't do it myself. Monsters and cowards are not Worthy and my earlier attempt by lesser means was clearly inadequate. This is what Mjolnir was forged for."

"Loki!" Jane protested, unable to wait any more for Thor to put a stop to this, even if she lost her chance to gather essential information.

But Thor held out a silencing hand in response to her sobbed plea, his face grave and closed. He threw the hammer down again and grabbed Loki by the shoulders. "Brother, it is an ignominy I do not invoke lightly to doubt the word of our father, but I must ask you for myself. I must hear it from no lips but yours. Is it really true?"

Loki let out a demented chuckle. "You would trust my word before Odin's?"

Thor's radiant sea foam eyes seemed to hold infinite sadness, his rough features softened by a new patience. "Perhaps in this I would. You used to tell me that Father was a king before he was a man, and I never understood you until… Brother, please tell me."

"It's true, idiot. Don't doubt it. I would prove it to you if I still had the Casket of Ancient Winters, but you may believe it without such a demonstration if all you need is my solemn word. A Jotun destroyed my armour with his burning touch while we were fighting that hopeless battle with which you tried to doom us. The effect of their magic was rather different on my flesh than on Volstagg's. I saw the colour of my blood that day on Jotunheim."

Thor's mouth turned down with fleeting but unmistakable distaste, his gaze dropping and his hands convulsing. Devastation pulled his shoulders into a slump.

Loki affected a sneer of grim triumph, though he was looking peaky again. "And now you have seen it also. The veil has been lifted that Odin used to keep his other little souvenir secret all these years. You know your duty now. Do it."

"I would not strike you down, Loki, not to your death, if generations of our ancestors rose from their graves to command it."

"Your ancestors, cretin, not mine!"

Thor's hand went back to Loki's throat, his grip immovable as Loki tried to shake it off. "You are my brother! You betrayed me, betrayed me twice over, Loki, lied to me! and I cared for you no less! What should blood matter when we shared a nursery, a training ground, and more debts than can be counted? I will never give you up. In my heart, the colour of your blood and mine is the same."

Loki stared at him, swallowing convulsively, his eyes still wild.

"I repent my arrogance. I should have listened to you more when you spoke of caution and discretion, I should have listened to you all our lives, but you must listen to me now. There's no honour in what we did. Either of us. You knew that once."

Squirming in the hold, Loki's frustration grew with every word Thor said and he sputtered, "What honour could there be in temperance when you speak of destroying monsters? Monsters, brother!"

Thor's thumbs were digging into Loki's cheeks now as he added the other hand, again forcing Loki to meet his gaze. "How can they be?" he asked, almost gently.

"Don't!" spittle flew as Loki screamed in his face. "Don't patronise me!"
"I don't!"

"You haven't changed so much! You still consider me your malleable lackey, only existing when convenient, you still think you can tell me how it is to be and so it is, you can tell me my place and I'll go back to it grateful you deign to let me beg at your heels and subsist on your scraps! I will never be the faithful second son again. That life is ended, there is no pretending or threatening the scales back into my eyes even if I could set foot long enough on Asgard for you to try. With no chance Odin will need to appease my… the dead king of a barbarous race, he won't permit you to keep your dangerous pet any longer!"

Thor roared in exasperation, shaking Loki so roughly that his teeth clacked together, "Do you hear nothing of what is said to you?"

Jane put her hands on Thor's arms, making him whirl to look at her and suddenly let go. She grimaced at his frazzled stare. "Hey. Long time no see. How about everyone takes some deep breaths and we all put on our grown up pants and have a conversation without any screaming and violence? I'll settle for just no violence if the screaming is really called for because yeah, I get it, but no more manhandling."

"Jane Foster." Thor nodded to her soberly, apparently remembering his manners now that he'd somewhat acclimatised to the idea that his dead brother was back from the grave, even if he was being just as hard to deal with as any ghost. He glanced around awkwardly, his fists clenching and unclenching as he tried to calm down and take in the situation. "Then you have completed your bridge?"

"Yeah, pretty much," she agreed neutrally. She grabbed Loki's wrist, sensing he was still on the edge of freaking out and wanting to keep tabs on him without taking her eyes off Thor. She pulled at him indicatively, adding, "This guy helped. I didn't know he was your brother until like a couple days ago."

Thor scowled at her hand holding Loki's arm and then at Loki himself, clearly unimpressed that he'd gone on with his deceitfulness spree after the big blow up between them and the whole not-telling-anyone-I'm-not-dead thing.

"He tried to pass himself off as human for a while." She forced a laugh, a bubble of hysteria rising up inside her that she only sort of had a handle on. "Not super convincing, I have to say."

Loki huffed half-heartedly. "It was a somewhat cursory effort on my part, Jane," he rasped, though she thought he was coming by it honestly at this point, his voice legitimately worn out from shouting.

"I one hundred percent believe you could do better." She squeezed his arm and almost called him kemosabe or honey or something equally ridiculous and she was losing it. He hadn't tried that hard to fool her effectively even though he was good at it because he was a suicidal train wreck who almost killed an immediate family member and she was comforting him. This was her life now. She must be certifiable, because she couldn't even regret it, not when it meant she knew how to punch a hole in space time.

Thor's scowl deepened. "How did you get here, Loki?"

"I fell. This is where I landed."

"More lies?"

Loki laughed weakly, but she could feel him give a tiny shiver. "Not this time. I expected to die."
Totally not believing this, Thor shook his head, anger and disappointment radiating from his stiff figure. "What do you want with this world? What do you want with Jane? Why wouldn't you let Heimdall see you! I grieved for you! Why would you tell me-"

"Don't be obtuse, Thor, I know better than to believe it of you." Loki noticed her hand drifting down his arm towards his fingers, her nervous desire to hold onto him more firmly, and delicately turned his wrist out of her grip. Their eyes met for a split second and he pressed his lips together and very subtly inclined his head. Jane thought she knew what he was saying, thought she saw an apology and an understanding, but it was a whole can of worms she couldn't open when a fight could break out at any wrong word.

"Explain!" Thor demanded, practically vibrating with irritation.

"He thinks he's under some kind of death sentence," Jane cut in before Loki got a chance to make things worse. He wasn't going to lay it out any clearer than he already had and Thor obviously couldn't imagine that he'd been serious, couldn't see the implicit claim about what would have happened to him if he'd stayed on Asgard. "He really thought you'd kill him."

Thor snorted contemptuously. "He knows-"

"I don't think he does, though!" Jane felt stupid having this argument with Loki standing there, but they'd get nowhere if she didn't moderate this craziness. There had been the niggle of doubt before whether Loki was telling the truth about what he thought Thor would do, that possibility that he was just trying to win her onto his side and get her to feel sorry for him. Keep the ball in his court. But she believed him now without reservation. She thought he was wrong, but she believed that he believed it. She saw his face when Thor was headed towards him.

"What is his business here? With you?"

"He helped me build the bridge, Thor. He offered to do whatever he could in exchange for being part of the project. It's all I've been doing all this time and he was pretty much always with me. He barely even lied to me. In fact..."

Loki's touch on her shoulder made her turn to look up at him, but his attention was on his brother. "Is this not precisely what you did when you thought you were trapped here? The only difference being that I had the benefit of knowing where to look for assistance and far more to contribute to Jane's cause. What do you imagine my purpose to be?"

Thor's eyes tracked down to where Loki's hand was resting on her shoulder and then back up to his face with deliberate, accusatory slowness, his expression hard and foreboding.

Loki's fingers clutched her reflexively, a flush of outrage staining the high arches of his cheekbones, his lips receding from his clenched teeth as he jutted his jaw forward and caught a heavy breath. He snatched his hand away from her and turned his back on them with a sound like a strangled retch. He walked three or four steps and vanished.

Jane gaped after him for a few seconds and then immediately threw herself into Thor's personal space, jerking a thumb behind her to indicate the general area where Loki had disappeared. "What the hell was that?"

Thor's almost palpable aura of threat melted away, but the set of his mouth was stern and his hooded eyes were still full of annoyance and almost impatience. Like Loki was embarrassing him as well as pissing him off. "I apologise, Jane Foster. My brother is very..."
Jane flapped her hand dismissively. "He's very a lot of things, okay, but he doesn't get that upset for no reason."

"I think you will find, Jane-" Thor began, nearly amused. He hadn't totally lost that arrogant playfulness she remembered about him, the sense that he didn't quite take things seriously. She wasn't in the mood for it.

"No, I won't. I won't find, because I'm right. He was full on trying to get you to murder him a few minutes ago, really thinking you would and that was fine with him, then this, and I'm telling you right now that he does not just give up when he thinks he's winning the argument. What could you possibly have implied just now that was the last straw?"

Looking deeply uncomfortable, Thor drew a breath and held it a moment.

She waited, but no words came.

"Forget it, I'll ask him." She had no idea where he'd gone or where to look for him if he wasn't in the lab, and the worry about what he might be doing was like rocks in her stomach, but she hadn't broken apart yet and she wasn't going to now.

"No, wait." Thor held out a hand, his voice soft. "Loki, he... he helped our enemies to breach our defences, to slip inside my father's vault, simply to-"

"The Jotuns, to interrupt your coronation and show everyone how rash he thought you could be. I know, he told me."

He looked startled. "He told you that?"

"Well, he didn't exactly spell that part out and connect all the dots, but I'm not an idiot, and he did tell me his whole side of the story. I asked him for it and he gave it to me."

Thor's face was creased with consternation, and he shook his head. "Did he speak of his appearance on Earth the night I was held captive by Coul's son? Did he speak of feeding me poisonous lies while I was in my despair? Telling me that my father was dead of heartbreak by my actions, that my mother blamed me for it and would see me no more, that I could never return home on pain of war? Those things were not so. He was striking at my heart."

Jane almost wanted to laugh; it burned in her throat. She wasn't surprised, she wasn't even a tiny bit surprised. The instant she heard him say it, she knew exactly how it had gone down. She even knew why.

"His words cannot be trusted, Jane Foster. He uses them to his own ends."

"I know! I know!" She felt her bubble of hysteria burst, her hands flying around in desperate gesticulations as she let words rush out, "You think I don't realise that? You think I don't know he manipulates and he misleads and even his honesty's a bit warped because he thinks everything is a million times worse than it is? I know him! I know how he lies and he lies ninety-nine percent by omission. Okay! He's paranoid, he thinks... He told you that shit because he thought he needed to keep you away from Asgard no matter what and he didn't want to fight you. He probably kind of believed it, but about him not you. He projects! I don't know your culture or your childhood or whatever, but there's a reason he hates himself so much. There's a reason he can't understand that not everything has strings attached."

Thor weathered this outburst with measuring attention, his attitude one of having a trump card up his sleeve. His gaze pinned her to the spot. "As we fought on the bifrost after my return, he threatened
your life, Jane. He promised me he would visit you. He wished to anger me then, to goad me to fight, and had I been thinking clearly I would likely have dismissed it as empty words, but now I find that he is here and they seem more substantial than I reckoned even in my rage."

Cold twisted in her guts, but she shook her head. "Get in the van. We're going to find him. He better hope he's around to be found."

"What of your bridge? It will be unguarded."

"The power is fully depleted, no one can do anything with it. If SHIELD swoops in and tries to make off with it, I think we can probably convince them they shouldn't. Those assholes deserve to be scared."

.............

She found him in her trailer. She opened the door more out of thoroughness than any expectation that he would actually be in there, but he was. Sitting awkwardly in her tiny dining area with his feet stacked one on top of the other on their outer edges and his long legs angled outward to fit under the table. His helmet was in front of him, facing him with its empty stare, and he toyed with the edge of the jaw guard.

"Hey," she said cautiously as she stepped inside and let the door fall shut behind her.

"Where is Thor?"

"He's doing a walk around the perimeter. Looking for you. I mean, I sent him, but he probably would have done it anyway." She was babbling, twisting the hem of her shirt with her fingers.

Loki pushed the helmet away and stood up more quickly than she would have imagined possible from that position in a booth seat. His cape trailed over the bench, his armour making him look way too big for the cramped space. He held out his hands towards her, his gaze resting somewhere to the left of her feet.

Jane decided he meant for her to come closer, so she stepped forward and was suddenly swept up in his arms, the hug so tight that she was lifted completely off the ground. His nose bumped her cheek as he pulled her close, supporting her weight with one hand while the other buried itself in her hair.

She felt the warmth of his breath against her neck as he whispered fervently into her shoulder, "I would have said anything, I would have said anything."

It was very like an apology, very like a denial and a bit like shame, and in the face of it there was so much that just didn't seem important any more. Maybe it had been about a lot of things when he first decided to get involved with her work. These were questions she'd asked him enough times, and she was starting to think she could be satisfied that he really didn't have any concrete answers. What Thor said couldn't make much difference, it wasn't anything she hadn't suspected. Lingering anger leached away, because she knew what he had been doing. She'd just watched him try it again.

"Why do you want to die?" She slid her hands over the spaulders covering his shoulders and under his cape where there was more exposed fabric, trying to ignore the way his high metal collar was digging into her chest.

With his face completely hidden from view, he was shockingly forthcoming. "I don't, quite. I don't... but I don't have any great investment in surviving. Not as I am, not this way. In every sense bar crude biological fact, I feel as though I am dead already. It is a tiresome sort of burden to wake and find myself still living. I have nothing to live for."
"You don't think maybe your real problem is facing all the things you have to live with?"

He squeezed her and she really wished he were wearing something with less hard edges, but she didn't pull away. She wrapped her legs around his waist so he couldn't put her down until she was ready to let him.

"As long as you're breathing," she said, thinking he was most upset because Thor's insinuation wasn't totally off base and he hated that he couldn't flatly deny it, couldn't claim to be above that, "it's not really more than you can handle."

"Have you never given up?" he muttered, a little petulantly.

"Absolutely I have, but it's never been permanent. Hopeless is a state of mind, Mr Power of the Will. Would it be so terrible if you just admitted to yourself that you feel guilty?"

A shudder went through his chest and he pressed even closer to her, so close that she felt his lips moving against the skin of her throat as he spoke, "Yes, it would. So much would be for naught, sheer pig-headed folly. So much irredeemable. If I could make my peace with that, I would not have let go and I would not be here. More's the pity for you that I cannot."

"I don't think it's a pity for me."

"Jane, don't be absurd. The device isn't worth it, you would have eventually advanced on your own sufficiently for even your mind to remain occupied."

"Don't tell me what to think. I don't think it's a pity, because I'm glad you're here. Not that I would have put you through this if it were up to me."

"You wouldn't be glad if you truly... I put myself 'through it'. It's all my fault."

"I dunno, it sounds significantly more spread out than that to me, and I kinda have my doubts about your dad's parenting strategy. Between lying to you your whole life and banishing Thor to another planet, I'm getting some red flags. No offence, sweetheart."

He finally lifted his head, shifting his hold on her so he could look her in the eyes. "Even now?"

"Even now I still consider you a person? Even now I think you're worth having around? Yeah. I came looking all ready to chew you out, but I understand you too well to even need to say it. You know what I was going to say and I know you feel like shit about it. You're going to make my lecture into something I don't want it to be if I put it into words because you see the world so grimly, but I don't need to say it because you know, so we'll just skip that. Everything's not hunky dory, maybe I'm going to have a second round of angry when the science high wears off, but that doesn't mean I'm okay with you ducking out on me. Things are different than they were when you first decided to come see me, a lot's changed. We're in this together."

Loki's eyebrows went up in the middle and his lips twitched into a subtle moue of uncertainty, the overall effect being a kind of lost puppy look that she wouldn't have anticipated ever seeing on his face. "What are we 'in'? The bridge is completed and proven operational. Thor has returned to you. What further use am I that you will continue to ignore your better sense and protect me for it?"

Jane sighed. "You know, for a next level super-genius, you can kind of be an idiot."

A loud, exuberant voice from outside interrupted before he could sputter out a heated retort, "Hey, dude! Look who it is! Is it just me or are you even huger than you were before? And still with the outfit and Mew-mew! So it worked out in space, I guess. Awesome. Where's Jane? I might need to
kill her a little."

"It would seem Miss Lewis has arrived. And been reunited with my brother."
His grip on her loosened, his hand against her back guiding her towards the floor as she reluctantly unhooked her legs and slid down his body to stand on her own two feet again. She wasn't ready to leave the quiet of this moment, the eye of the storm, she'd give almost anything for a week to sit undisturbed in the middle of her bed while she made sense of things. Even by her standards, there was a lot happening at once. Not to mention a lot of emotional baggage to sort.

She gave him a weak smile, her knees jittery and her hands wanting to tangle in her hair. His face would have seemed tranquil if not for the hunted look in his eyes.

Darcy's distinctive, uncompromising rap on the side of the trailer broke them out of their long mutual hesititation and reminded Jane sharply that stopping for a breather wasn't a realistic option just now. She winced apologetically at Loki and turned to head out the door.

"Heeey, Jane," Darcy greeted with painfully exaggerated casualness, her eyes bugged out with mock surprise, "I don't know what it is, but here I am thinking you might not have listened to me." She flapped her arms descriptively at Thor, her lips pressed together so hard that her chin wrinkled. "I asked you for one simple favour, Brainiac, and I said please. I said 'please don't do anything until I get there', and what do you do? You do possibly the Janest thing that… holy shit they're multiplying."

Loki was behind her on the steps, mostly hidden inside the trailer, but it was still pretty apparent he was not dressed for planet Earth. Jane jumped sheepishly, having forgotten she was boxing him in once the Darcy floodgates opened. She stepped aside and held her breath while he made his entrance. He had to stoop to fit through the small door frame and he took the opportunity of his already bent head to slip his helmet on, pushing it into place as he straightened up. Standing to his full height as his boots hit the sand, he tossed his cape so it fell correctly and the hem flared gracefully behind him.

Jane was torn behind rolling her eyes and an overflowing well of fondness. His little performance was a mirror in which she saw herself trying on glasses she didn't need and power suits she didn't like before going in to teach her first class or beg for a grant in front of some soulless committee. She didn't begrudge him his misguided attempts to reassemble what he could of his personal armour. Metaphorically, that is, although the literal armour did seem to be part of it. Besides, it didn't come off unimpressive no matter how silly it objectively was.


Jane had already told her a hurried and abbreviated version of the truth on the phone. She'd swear blind she did. Looking at Darcy with slight concern, uncertain which of them she was more concerned for, she said slowly, "This is Loki."

Darcy blew through her lips scoffingly at Jane's bemused expression. "I mean: hello, I know that. I mean, I figured, but I wasn't really prepared."

Loki adjusted his posture, not peering down his nose at them so much any more. "Are you disappointed, Miss Lewis?"

"Oh, no way. Yeah, it's definitely wild. Big excitement, thrill a minute. Question: so like, you and Thor, do you have these little tiffs often where you almost blow up a town? Is that like a Tuesday for you guys? Because maybe you shouldn't hang out with Jane in that case, she makes me fear for my
safety enough without help."

He smirked at her, tilting his head so the sun gleamed on the helmet's shiny, lethal looking horns. "Oh, Miss Lewis, what has happened to your spirit of adventure? You accused me of leading a boring life when we visited your city."

Darcy was struck momentarily speechless, a vanishingly rare phenomenon, and her fish mouthed, gob smacked look threatened to send Jane into hysterics. She recovered quickly. "Right. In my defence- who stays in when they're in Vegas?"

"Surely my brother and I are more interesting than gambling." He leaned down closer to her level, his tone conspiratorial, "You have been presented with essentially the embodiment of intergalactic politics."

Thor, who had been watching all of this with an implacable frown, decided he had had enough. "Loki, I don't know what you angle towards, but I will tolerate none of your games. I apologise for my brother, Darcy."

"Ah, you see!" Loki unfurled his fingers grandly, indicating Thor. "Diplomacy. He learns it at last. I attended to my lessons in statecraft, Miss Lewis, think of the paper you could write."

"Loki," Jane murmured warningly, knowing he could do this all day and totally would given the chance. She wasn't even mad at him, she wanted to avoid dealing with the nuclear fallout scattered all over their lives just as much as he did, but someone had to be an adult.

He raised an eyebrow at her. It seemed to ask what she had expected him to do in this situation. "Jane did mention you guys are super important alien royalty. Honestly, it made total sense for you, Luke." Darcy hugged herself, pulling on her lip with her teeth absent mindedly. Something occurred to her and she waved her hand. "No offence, Thor."

Thor's brow furrowed and Loki managed a real laugh, grinning at Darcy like he couldn't be more pleased with her.

"Shut up," Jane whispered to him before he could say anything. He flashed her a tiny mock pout.

"All right," Darcy went on, shoving her glasses up with her knuckle and trying to look stern, "so back to me yelling at Jane."

Jane scratched at her hairline, her face screwing up. "Sorry? I mean, I'm sorry I didn't wait for you, Darcy, I wanted you to be here, especially because..."

Darcy glanced around suddenly, interrupting, "Wait, where's Erik?"

"Yeah, about that. I wanted you to be here for the test, but I really wasn't ready to deal with yet another person trying to stop me right when I was about fulfil my life's work. I wasn't going to let anything else screw it up."

Darcy frowned. "Okay, boss, I am on your side and everything, but that sounded a little more dangerous mad scientist than I'm comfortable with."

"What has happened to Erik Selvig?" Thor cut in, his eyes darting between the two women like he couldn't decide who he should be rooting for.

Loki leaned back on one heel, the carefully insouciant stance he affected belied by his left hand
fidgeting with the edge of his cape. "Jane banished him from the laboratory and our efforts on the
bridge."

Thor blinked at his brother, then turned to Jane incredulously.

She shrugged. "He betrayed us, he went to SHIELD behind my back so they could lock up my
research and throw away the key. Probably with me in there with it, too, and he knew that was more
than a passing chance. Who knows what he thought they would do to Loki."

"I can't say I'm super surprised he ended up doing that, but..." Darcy was saying.

"He must have had cause!" Thor exclaimed desperately, "Erik Selvig would not be disloyal to you, Jane."

Jane sighed. How was this the most pressing thing for them to talk about? "Well, he was.
Professionally disloyal. So I cut professional ties."

"He believed he was acting for what was right," Loki said pointedly, his gaze intent on Thor, "for
the greater good."

"It was not about protecting me," Jane added firmly, wanting that made totally clear. She knew Loki
wasn't implying that it was- he understood the argument perfectly from both sides- but Thor was
developing a second hand hangdog expression she didn't like at all. "He thought he had to protect
New Mexico from me. Because apparently he thinks I don't know what I'm doing."

"Okay, but..." Darcy paused to regroup, closing her eyes for a moment. "Okay, I need coffee and I
need to hear the whole story start to finish. And I need to be sitting down, and you guys, Norse
Chippendales, you need to be in the chorus explaining your crap too."

Jane exchanged a long-suffering look with Loki.

Thor said, "What are Chippendales?"

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Thor's version of events and explanation of their background dovetailed nearly perfectly with Loki's
right up until his banishment to Earth. This was where important information started to be third hand
(Jane hated third hand information, her preference was first, second in a pinch, but third was an extra
layer of interpretation over someone's interpretation and that sat poorly with her as something to base
major judgement calls on). It was also where things started getting hairy, in regards to keeping the
conversation civil and non-shouty.

This, her second Weird Conference in the Lab, looked even more goofy than the first. She and
Darcy, petite humans dressed like college vagrants (and you knew Darcy was worried when she
reached Jane's level of 'dressed in the dark from an unsorted pile of laundry' aesthetic), were sitting
next to each other on the vinyl sofa. Thor and Loki, huge alien warriors in full royal regalia, each
dwarfed one of the mismatched seventies office chairs at opposite ends of the room. The slight air
they gave off of adults sitting on kiddie furniture did nothing to mitigate the absurdity of the scene.

"You should have swallowed your ego- doubtless difficult as it is to swallow what is so comically
bloated- and left in peace when I gave us the chance! Father would have forgiven you in an instant
as he always does, if only you hadn't started a war and-"

"I!!" Thor bellowed, "Who brought Jotuns into Asgard? Who said nothing as I was banished?"
Loki’s throat bobbed, the bluster going out of him. Jane could see the guilt written across his features and wondered if it was as obvious to his brother as it was to her.

"I shoulder the blame for my actions," Thor said, pounding his breastplate with his fist for emphasis, "they were my own and the punishment I reaped for them was justly mine to bear, but it was not I alone who made this bed of thorns. It was not I alone who was reckless and wanton."

"I tried!" Loki interrupted urgently, the words practically bursting out of him. "I never meant for us to leave Asgard, to risk our lives, I never thought to see you banished. I tried to tell him, but Father..."

Thor watched his brother closely, his eyes flinty as he weighed whether he felt inclined to believe him. Something flashed across his face. "Yes, I do remember you speaking to him."

"He was too angry. He thought I would try to..."

"As if you ever dared test your silver tongue on Father." Thor shook his head, a sad, wistful cast to his mouth. He grunted to himself, rallying to attempt a feeble joke which was tinged with bitterness, "You knew the Allfather was not so brash and gullible as I."

Loki twitched his lips to the side, his gaze on the floor. "You're not gullible, brother. You're honest."

Jane wanted to say something to his credit then, to remind him that he was astonishingly emotionally honest even if his relationship to the letter of the truth was strained, but she was sure he didn't see that as a good thing any more than his ability to dissemble and sweet talk was considered a good thing on his home planet.

"You did often talk me out of trouble with Mother," Thor said, maybe offering an olive branch.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Mother is no one's fool. She enjoys being charmed and being lenient, we gave her tremendous opportunity for both."

Thor looked knowing, then his mood suddenly soured. "You told me she forbade my return and now you let her think you dead. That is quite the charm you've wound up."

A red flush of anger bloomed on Loki's cheeks and brow, but his words were cold, "All the better for her if it were so."

"There again!" Thor roared, making to stand.

"Whoa there, dude!" Darcy threw herself across the couch to grab Thor's shoulder and settle him back down. He shied away from her restraining hand instinctively, but then allowed it, subsiding into his chair. "Everybody stay cool," she went on carefully, surveying every face in turn for signs of mutiny, "lots more story to get through and no one's starting a sword fight until I hear the end."

Jane sent Loki as stern a look as she could manage under the circumstances. His bottomless self-loathing was as frustrating for her as it was for Thor, and it was hard to keep the angry helplessness she felt out of her expression.

He grimaced at her and raked his hand through his hair, his helmet having been tossed aside when they came in. "I couldn't risk your homecoming, brother," he said, sticking to the relatively safer topic of his terrible lies in the SHIELD facility. He explained his position something like he'd explained it to Jane, but he meticulously avoided any indication of fear in a way he hadn't before. Now it was about law and honour and the good of Asgard. His terror and jealousy and satisfaction he left out. Finally, he added, "I did not wish to fight you."
"If that is true, that wish was short-lived," Thor said impatiently. "The moment I returned-

"Because you returned! Because I couldn't prevent it. Use your brain."

"I have, and my eyes, also. I was not worthy when Father banished me, how did you expect to become so by matching me for folly?"

Pale as a sheet and his grip on the steel arm of his chair slowly crushing the metal out of shape, Loki was speechless.

"You knew instinctively the virtue of discretion all those years of our childhood, I look back and see yours was often the wise counsel I badly needed. How could you yourself forget it?" Thor sounded very tired and genuinely puzzled. It was the first time he could ask and hope for an answer, but Jane could tell it was far from the first time he'd thought about the question.

"Where did it ever get me, Thor?" Loki demanded. "What did I ever have to show for it? Shipped off as a child to learn useful but embarrassing arts in long exile, assigned tutors to be taught the tedious details of agriculture and negotiation and bureaucracy and everything else your time was too precious for, your natural greatness without need of, all to sit invisible in your shadow and spend eternity as a silent minder. Resented and ignored. I am not your valet!"

"Loki-"

"I wanted sonship and it was and is what I can never have, and he should have told me what I was so I would have known I didn't deserve it! It was cruelty to let me believe it was within my grasp to earn!" His voice broke and he sat rigid, panting for breath.

Jane reached over and pried his fingers off the ruined chair arm, turning his hand over and wrapping both of hers around it. "You don't earn a father. Every kid deserves a family."

He dashed a tear off his chin, looking supremely pissed that his body was betraying him when he wanted so badly not to care any more. "Monsters don't, Jane Foster."

Thor shivered and Jane snapped her head around to stare at him with naked reproach. She didn't know who she was most exasperated with.

"To be honest, they don't sound that different than any other people."

Every pair of eyes was on Darcy. Thor's mouth was hanging open and Loki seemed in danger of passing out from a catastrophic spike in his blood pressure.

Darcy shrugged. "Yeah, warlike vertical collectivist society with a supreme overlord and expansionist ambitions- like, it's not very original, is it? Seems their king wanted to avoid pointless fighting right up until he saw his chance to get revenge on the rival overlord who neutered his kingdom and shamed him as a warrior. Pretty standard human behaviour, really. Maybe I should say 'humanoid'."

"Darcy Lewis," Thor began, his voice strangled.

"No, no, no, my bro," she cut him off, tapping the side of her head with her index finger, "Political Science major. And I actually paid a lot of attention in my classes. According to your tattle tale little brother, I'm way ahead of you on sociological analysis."

Loki laughed until he choked, threading his fingers through Jane's and squeezing her hand gently in apparent approval of her fantastically entertaining intern. She didn't know how to feel, so she
squeezed back and watched him dazedly.

"You laugh, but I'm top of my class." Darcy hesitated. "Well, I'm top ten, but that's still really good when you consider everything I've got going on."

"As was Thor," Loki said, smirking, "but as there were fewer than ten of us all told, the achievement is not eminently notable."

"Enough!" Thor thumped his armrest. "Enough diversion, brother, enough games. Charges pile at your feet and I would have answers to them, I would have more than flippancy and fits of temper."

"Enough!" Loki more hissed than scoffed in response, his scorn palpable. "Yes, let us read off the roll of my misdeeds, let us pretend it were so simple. Did I lie that the throne came to me by law and supposed birthright? Correctly and uprightly?"

"No," Thor grunted, clearly very suspicious of where this was headed, "Mother agrees. In that one particular, you spoke only the truth."

"So it follows that when 'our' esteemed friends disobeyed both mine and Odin's explicit command in an attempt to bring you home and launch a coup d'etat, they were traitors to two kings."

"Coup d'etat! They acted..." Thor ranted indignantly, then faltered, actually thinking it over.

Loki seized on the hesitation in ugly triumph, "They acted on nothing. They knew nothing but that Loki was king and they did not like it. Death would be only just, but I did not try to kill them. Our friends. The Destroyer would have reduced them to ash if I had willed it so."

"It sure looked like there was an effort being made," Jane said, darkness dripping from her tone.

Loki met her eyes, his own a bit wild, and licked his lips hesitantly. "I intended destruction-"

"You got that!"

He leaned toward her. "I said to it 'destroy', not 'kill', no humans were killed."

"Thor was kinda killed," Darcy interjected before Jane could.

"With his true strength-"

"You knew I was stripped of my strength. No one better."

"I did not think you were a mortal!"

"Now who plays the fool, Loki?"

He shot forward in his chair, his voice vicious, "As if you took greater care when you arrived on this world, as if you didn't scatter humans like nine pins even without your power. As if you didn't take every advantage!"

Jane huffed in anger. "I know you are but what am I? Really, Loki? Over totalling most of a high street and putting dozens of innocent people in harm's way?"

He worried his thumb, staring down at his hands in nervous misery.

"He is not wrong," Thor said unhappily, "I was proud."
"Aristocrats' malady."

"Yes, thank-you, Darcy," Jane snapped, in no mood for political philosophy.

Loki glanced up at her through his eyelashes, his head still down. His words were barely above a whisper, halting and addressed to her alone, "I am sorry for it, Jane Foster. Mortals were unimportant, I thought nothing of them. I thought very little of you."

She held her breath when he finally lifted his head, his mournful gaze locking with hers.

"An error which I shall never repeat."

Darcy made a noise in her throat, but Jane barely registered it. His eyes were as wide as the sea and she drifted there in their stormy blue.

"So perhaps we have both been humbled," Thor broke the silence. He sounded sceptical.

Loki sighed heavily, resignedly.

"Is humbled really the right word for him?" Jane's stupid mouth blabbered aloud before her brain got a chance to veto.

But Loki spoke at the same time, "At last I know my place, brother," and she was almost glad he was still shit stirring because at least no one was going to confront her over the deeply unwanted contradiction which had just leaked out of her face. Not that she didn't stand by it, but she and tact weren't complete strangers.

Thor tossed his head in annoyance. "You never have and I begin to think you never will."

"Hey now," Darcy objected, sensing fighting words.

Thor paid her no mind, pressing on, "Your place was at my side, in our family, on the dais. Your place was brother, son and prince, never anything less. I never thought you less."

"You spoilt, ignorant child," Loki said, cool and detached, like a judge passing sentence. "The web of indulgent favouritism frays for three short days and now you think yourself temperate and wise. Now you know forbearance and compassion, your sufferings have made you magnanimous, equal to any man. What could I have suffered which would compare? Ridiculous. And this is an extremity of bald faced lie even I would shy from. When you told me to keep to my place, you knew what it was and it was no saccharine dribble the likes of which you've just-"

Jane went for his hand again, missed, and grabbed at his knee.

He shook her off. "I am son to no one! I was a tool he hoarded for the same purpose he collected every other treasure in his vault, and that's how he treated me. That's how you always treated me! You knew, you sensed, and you were right. No need for more flowery fictions, we're all terribly impressed with your generosity!"

"I took you for granted, brother," Thor said slowly, the strain of holding on to his temper blatant in his pinched expression, "but it was mere arrogance, mere thoughtlessness. I considered my esteem beyond question. I have not always been as I ought, it is true, but I never looked on you as other than my greatest friend, my most trusted ally. There could be no doubt, it did not need to be spoken."

Loki let his head fall into his hand, his fingers white where they pressed hard against his temples, his shoulders hunched.
"Yes it did," Jane said for him when it was clear he wouldn't bother. *And maybe if it had been said a long time ago, he might actually have believed it.*

Thor's focus shifted to her, his posture becoming awkward and tense as he considered her. "What was it to which Erik Selvig could not consent?"

Alarm bells went off in her head. "Trying the bridge."

"That is all?"

"Well..." She twisted a bit of hair around her finger, praying she could navigate this minefield without loss of life. "Not really. It was kind of cumulative. He didn't understand how it was going to work at all, anything we were doing, he didn't believe in it."

Thor's features were stoic, but there were worlds of pain in his eyes.

"I... I tried to keep him up to speed, but he was being so obstinate and panicky about..."

"Yes?"

Loki flopped bonelessly in his chair, letting himself slide down until his chin was practically on his chest, his hands dangling over the arms. "Just say it, Thor. Come to the point. It was me he couldn't abide with more than anything else. He never trusted me for a moment, and I think hated me."

"He doesn't hate you," Jane said automatically, and was sure it was true in spite of Erik's mistrust and anger.

Thor rested his hands on his knees, looking ready to launch himself up at a moment's notice. His heavy gaze swept over Loki's insolent, provocative sprawl disapprovingly. "Did you hope to drive him away sooner?"

"*He* didn't get a vote!" Jane protested, furious.

"You are an appalling strategist, brother," Loki drawled, tut tutting as if Thor were a naughty child. "It's remarkable you managed to ingratiate yourself with Jane's work in the first place, but of course that was about what you knew, wasn't it? And sacred hospitality, always; a kindness neither of us has ever appreciated as it warrants. I don't pretend my being here is anything different. But you do, you underestimate Jane Foster with such insulting severity in your quest to paint me black for her that even she may not forgive it."

"I don't need your brushes, Thor, I am blacker than pitch and none of it is hidden from her. You make the same mistake that Erik Selvig did if you assume she does not know her own mind. Isn't that so, Jane? For such a long time I thought I was ruthlessly exploiting your curiosity, but you knew me well. Perhaps from the first moment."

Jane's mouth went dry, tension twisting up her muscles as she waited breathlessly for what else he might say, what line he might go over. He could see some things so clearly, he had so much preternaturally penetrating insight, a completely scary ability to look right through her, and yet for how right he was about this, he was so wrong about so many more important things.

"If I had decided to do it, brother, schemed with her as my Queen of the board against you, I should have failed utterly. That you don't know that... I am sorry, Jane. I would have wished better for your sake." He stood up and bowed over her hand. "I will leave you now to finish the tale as you see fit, I am weary of talk. Fear not, Thor, I shan't escape. I give you my word I will return, but I've been remiss in monitoring the activities of your delightful human friends in SHIELD."
The three of them watched him stalk out the glass doors into the blinding sunset, scooping up his helmet as he went by.

"Right. This shit is intense. Jane, your turn to talk again. Blow me away."

Thor settled his chin on his fist, gazing gloomily into the desert. "Yes, Jane Foster, I am also most keen to hear."
When Jane's rambling narrative finally limped semi-coherently to the moment of Thor's arrival in the desert, the Asgardian in question seized the arms of his chair and heaved himself to his feet with alarming suddenness.

"Forgive me, Jane," he more announced than asked over the tail end of what she had been saying as her voice petered out. He grimaced importantly. "I must see to my brother."

Jane blinked at him in surprise for a few milliseconds before her brain switched gears. "See to him? See to him how? What does that mean?"

"Yeah," Darcy put in. "And that was a bit rude, Thor, I thought we learned this after the cup thing."

"It was rude," Jane agreed, vindicated. "Answer the question. Questions. Whatever."

Thor did look a bit contrite, if slightly more impatient. "I beg your pardon. I would speak to him."

Jane lifted an eyebrow at that. "That's all? That's all 'seeing to him' means?"

"I feel it is my duty as a sworn guardian of this world and brother to Loki to protect them from each other." Thor bowed his head, as if deferring to her judgement.

An uneasy feeling seeped up into her body, a wafting of suspicion she couldn't fully answer or suppress. Thor definitely didn't see things quite how she might hope. She worried about what was going on in his mind, what he thought he knew and what he feared.

"Okay," she said cautiously, not knowing else she could really say. "I can understand that. You won't be far, though, right? Loki won't have gone far." She was completely certain of that to an extent which might not be totally justified by her knowledge of how close by the SHIELD base of operations was.

Thor bowed his head again, this time in acquiesce.

"Well, see you later, I guess." She chewed her fingernail nervously.

"Until we meet again, Jane Foster."

He strode toward the door, snatching up the hammer from its place beside his chair and saluting them with it as he left. Jane and Darcy watched him scan the horizon for a moment before he twirled the hammer at his side and tossed himself into the air like some superhuman shot-putter.

"So, then," Darcy said, rolling her index finger towards Jane like a tiny combine harvester.

"Ummm...?"

"So you and Thor made super awkward eye contact, and then...?"
Jane rolled her eyes. "I didn't say it was awkward!"

Darcy waved her protest aside. "You don't really need to say it, some things are obvious. Do I look dumb? You've gotten yourself into a hell of a soap opera here, Jane, and I don't just mean the Shakespearean tragedy that is the royal home life. Your knight in shining armour finally came back for you from his certain doom and, meanwhile, you fell for his brother in disguise."

She wanted to throw up, she was so fed up with everything. "Darcy, for the love of God-

"You can 'Darcy' me all you want, it's so close to being the stone cold sober truth that I can't even exaggerate for comic effect. Anyway, whatever. Tell me what else happened."

Jane had her qualms at this point, because the rest was pretty much a mountain of Thor and Loki's personal crap- mostly Loki's- and she wasn't sure she had the right to recap that for a peanut gallery, A, and B, she wasn't sure she wanted to add any ammunition to Darcy's arsenal. On the other hand, the two princes weren't exactly shy about carrying on Act V, Scene iii in front of whoever happened to be there, lately including Darcy, and Jane absolutely needed something she could keep doing without.

So she told her friend, in as much detail as she could bear, trying not to editorialise too much and leaving out only a few potentially salient particulars. She was musing about her conversation with Loki in her trailer and the way he made his big entrance afterwards when Darcy hummed gently to stave off the flow.

"And this is where I came in," she said, leaning thoughtfully on her hand.

Jane smacked her dry lips, almost relieved to stop talking even as more and more things that needed talking about bubbled to the surface of her mind like panicky submarines.

"Right." Darcy clapped her hands on her knees. "What the hell are you going to do?"

Groaning like she'd been punched, Jane sank despondently into the couch. "You know, I didn't spend three hundred years telling you all this just for your entertainment. I was kind of hoping for, if not advice, at least some kind of… something. Practical direction? I mean, obviously there's SHIELD to worry about and the next step in research pursuits is pretty-

Darcy leaned over and put her fingers over Jane's mouth, her eyebrows pressing together in sort of annoyed concern. "No, no, no. You don't want my advice about your mad science and the terrible life decisions you will definitely make so you can keep on mad sciencing. You already know you're riding that crazy train until it either pulls into Shining Time Station or runs out of track and crashes and burns with no survivors. You know what you're doing about the work, I can't talk you out of that being 'whatever it takes' any more than Erik could.

"You want me to talk you off a completely different ledge, and I'll be honest with you, boss, I may be out of my depth with this. I know I teased you a bunch and I guess I'm sorry about that now, but it really sounds like your biggest actual dilemma isn't even mostly about the science and hasn't been for a while."

The setting sun was searing directly into her brain, the west window a blinding molten orange, and staring at it was still less uncomfortable than trying to look Darcy in the eye. "You're not still planning ways to fix me up with aliens, are you? It's not really funny any more," she joked weakly, knowing she wouldn't get away with it for an instant.

"I'm being real with you right now, boss, kidding aside. I just listened to a lot of talking from you and
you are sounding like you *love him* and that is full on…"

Jane's teeth clacked painfully together as she flailed in attempt to get up, nearly slid off the couch and knocked her chin on her chest. "Ow!"

Darcy's expression contorted and she put her hand on Jane's shoulder to steady her, leaning close, getting in her face, "Jane...!"

"No, no," she babbled helplessly, "I'm... I...

"Do *not* tell me right now that you're seriously in love with the guy who tried to kill me before I turned 26. I saved a dog from that Cyclops thing! A cute little dog!"

"I didn't say that!"

"You conspicuously failed to deny it!"

She crossed her arms defiantly, ready to dig her heels in. "He didn't anyway, he didn't try to kill you, he didn't send that thing to kill us~"

"Ohh ho ho, you are *so* not helping your case!" Darcy engaged her in a bit of a bug-eyed staring contest for what felt like eternity before she sat back and started examining her nails as if she'd been cool as a cucumber this whole time. "Well, whatever the deal is on your end, he is *definitely* in love with you."

Her stomach seemed to hit her shoes and she saw her hand shaking as she lifted it to push her hair back. "He does not, don't be like this. Whole thing is ridiculous."

Darcy shrugged, unmoved. "Usually I would write it off as pandering romantic bullshit when someone lays out some heavy crap about protecting me to the death and fighting an army for me, going to the ends of the earth and all that, but Jane, in your case he means an actual literal army that *is* after you and I really think he *would*. And maybe you need me to remind you, maybe it's slipped your mind, but he actually *could*."

Jane stopped and thought and really *tried* to reconcile the fact that Darcy was completely right with some level of reality she recognised. He actually could, she had zero doubt, and maybe he even actually would. Go through SHIELD and their scare tactics and their stealing and their secret bunkers like a hot knife through butter. For her. For their work, at least. Either way, it was an incredibly sobering thought.

"They could probably raze the whole planet," she mumbled, either awestruck or horror-struck and not sure which. "Either one of them alone probably could."

"Good thing they took a shine to us, isn't it?" Darcy winked half-heartedly, looking drawn. "I did not guess this internship was going to be so intense. This is going to prepare me for public office, I think. What's a few launch codes to knowing Jane Foster?"

"Glad to be of service, Madame President." Jane saluted her wryly. "At least you still know where you're going. Everything in my life up until now has been leading to this spot, it's all been about getting here, where I am... and I'm honestly not sure how it ends after this. I never imagined an ending, really; I never thought past being right and then making the bridge work. I figured it would come naturally. Not sure- I mean, I have no clue. Supposing I get the chance, do I publish a few papers and go back to my normal career or..."

"Ask him if he's staying."
Jane winced, the dart striking home harder than Darcy could know. They were in it together, she'd told him, but she still wasn't thinking past the bridge, past the work. What was after that?

"You're going to need his help just to have the opportunity to write a paper after this. I can't fix SHIELD's little red wagon for you. Yet."

She rolled into the cushions, pressing her cheek against the unsympathetic vinyl, wishing she could bury herself in it. "Do I want him to stay?"

Darcy's shoulder bobbed in a shrug. "Do you?"

"He needs… a lot. More than I'm equipped to give, really. Who am I to think I can get him through and pick him up and dust him off on the other side?"

"You said he needed understanding, someone to try to figure him out, and you wanted to be the one to give him that."

She had said that. She was an even better judge of character than she'd realised. "Well, that was before..." It sounded lame. It felt lame.

Darcy poked her until she sat up, then gave her a frank look. "Yeah, when the possibilities were endless. He could have been a spy, or a SHIELD plant, or something worse, and you didn't even care. Is this a worst case scenario? Or is it just the most interesting?"

Jane stared balefully at the ceiling, not knowing whether she should feel vindicated or not. "I was right about him, though. All this insanity, but I was right about him."

"Meaning?"

"Who he was. Who he is. The stuff I didn't know is a pretty big deal, gotta admit, but..."

"It's a lot to handle, Jane. Who even knows."

"Yeah."

Thor had not considered even for a moment the possibility that he would be unable to locate his brother once he decided to look for him. Indeed, either Jane had predicted correctly that Loki would not go far, or he was returned from his business, because he was sitting on a high rock ridge just a league or so east of the human settlement. Fortune smiles on Thor again, he thought, the taste of this accustomed sentiment now sour.

Loki was no longer wearing his fine armour or even ordinary garb, but was clad in human garments much like some of those he had appeared in when Thor was a captive in the desert. Missing the dark outer layers he'd worn on that occasion, he was left in only a shirt and trousers, and it made him look thinner than ever, a reed in white silk. Thor was troubled by a familiar turbulence of primal feelings. He wanted to protect his vulnerable younger brother, and he wanted to purge an obviously weaker rival. He's not as he should be, Sif's voice drifted from some deep recess of his memory. Tricks and spells and dusty books. What kind of prince is that?

He thought of Loki's blunt, unfeeling confirmation of what Odin had with great pain at last explained upon being questioned about Loki's words on the bifrost. I'm not your brother, I never was. He imagined his brother's pale pink skin spreading with dark blue stain, like a bruise, his fine features twisting into a gnarled and hoary ugliness. He imagined cold black blood steaming as it splattered
warm Asgardian soil. His fist clenched so hard at his side that the bones creaked; he tasted bile.

"You lower yourself with mortal dress?" he demanded in lieu of greeting, his voice harsher than he had intended.

Loki measured him with an aside glance, as if he had Thor's heart on a scale, as if he could sit in judgement. Then he turned back to squint out over the desert, saying nothing.

"Loki," Thor tried again, searching within himself for the patience he was so earnestly labouring to cultivate. No further words would come to him, he could find no expression for his thought.

Loki unbuttoned his collar and rubbed at his neck. "The guard only bruised me more than your grip would have done. Ceremonial armour, terribly foolish of me to wear it into battle. This raiment may be lowly, but if we two should fight again, I think I should prefer to die in it than in my borrowed honours. It's closer to the truth."

Thor let the hammer fall and stepped away from it, making certain he was seen to do so. He could form no other response, his mind churning with meanings and implications.

"I never wanted you dead, Thor," Loki went on, his voice so low that it could scarcely be heard. "I cannot deny wanting to kill you, perhaps more often than you could possibly have guessed, but I never wanted you to be dead."

Swallowing hard and commanding himself to have forbearance, Thor nodded acceptance of this odd proclamation. A desire to challenge him he understood. If that were all, it would have been forgiven already.

"Do you think me a coward?"

Thor dropped onto the sand, resting his arms on his knees and avoiding eye contact with his brother. He was of two minds on this topic even before everything bound up in it had become so much more complicated. The situation was hardly improved.

"I cannot take pride in your methods," he said carefully, "but I have never seen you shrink from true battle once engaged."

Loki chuckled under his breath. "I've underestimated your tact, brother. It seems you have heard of such a thing, after all. But don't avoid the question. You can't suppose you'll out talk me. You hardly out talk Hogan."

Thor pushed down a hot wave of anger which threatened to burst over him. "I have answered your question."

"That isn't what I meant," Loki snapped, and it gave Thor comfort that he was not so languid and irreverent as his refuge in low wit would suggest.

"What did you mean?" He was weary of playing riddles and guessing what he was supposed to know. Sick to his grave of it.

Loki wrung his hands in his lap, his nostrils flaring. He was irritated, humiliated; he didn't want to explain himself. That very thing was perhaps the root of all his rhetorical games, and wouldn't that observation take the wind from his sails if Thor gave it voice. Were they such children, still?

"Because you feared me?" Thor asked, grasping the crux of the issue suddenly. A heaviness pulled at his chest, a feeling like the brushing of nettles painting itself over his skin. "No, I do not."
A deeply scrutinising gaze flicked back to him and Loki evidently quested in his expression for any trace of mockery.

Thor's guts heaved at the burning memory of his disgust- the disgust he could not help and which lingered like a shroud even now- and knew in his heart that Loki had not been wrong to fear him.

"It was your duty to protect the throne," he said and hoped that Loki was in fact so good at hearing what was not said as he always boasted of being.

Loki looked stricken by the compromise of this answer, his eyes wide and his lips parted in shock, then he ducked his head and his face went blank.

"Our friends may have done some wrong-" Thor began, attempting a neutral tone.

"Your friends," Loki interrupted savagely, sneering over his words.

Thor allowed the outburst to hang between them for a long moment, letting his brother think of Sif's hairpin and Frandral's generosity and Volstagg's kindness. Let him think of Hogun's sombre fairness. Let him contemplate what friendship was, how many times they had guarded one another's flanks.

"Our friends," he went on as if nothing had been said, "may have been hasty in coming here, I'll not argue it, but you betrayed me, brother, and more, if we are counting sins. You showed enemies into Father's vault and are a traitor too."

Loki scoffed and scowled down at the sand beneath him, picking at his fingernails.

"And what of Jane?" Thor added darkly. This was much more pressing treachery, now.

Loki raked his fingers through his hair and Thor noticed for the first time that it was nearly a span longer than it was when his brother let go his lifeline and fell from the bifrost in Asgard. Had so much time passed? But Loki was patient. His purposes could wait mortal lifetimes for fulfilment, what was a turn of the Earth?

"I was curious," Loki was saying, sounding far away and cloyingly wistful.

Thor frowned.

"The only part of my heart which still beat was the muscle of intrigue, and with nothing left to pursue in the wild world but satisfaction, why shouldn't curiosity be enough? Unlike you, I didn't require her assistance. If only I didn't wonder, I should never have darkened her door."

"You were always thus, I believe it was our second master of history who dubbed you 'the Relentless'," Thor granted gruffly, in no mood to think fondly on such a childhood recollection at this moment. "But that is not why you sought her out."

Loki sighed, resigned to his fate. "Isn't it?"

"No."

"Why did I then? Enlighten me."

Thor fought against the tensing of his muscles, gritted his teeth to keep his expression controlled. "Revenge."

Leaping to his feet and looking like he wanted nothing more in the universe than to spit in Thor's face, Loki paced like a prisoner. He was also obviously completely unsurprised. "Because the Norns
know, nothing has ever come to pass in all the branches of Yggdrasil since the dawn of the age that wasn't about you."

"Raging against them only makes me firmer in my convictions, brother. I have known you of old, though there is much perhaps I missed, and you protest too heartily for truth."

"You-!" Loki sputtered, at a loss for an insult scathing enough.

"Jane is innocent," Thor said calmly.

He laughed sharply. "Hardly."

"She deserves none of your wrath, none of whatever damage your use of her will do when you spring your trap to punish me."

Loki shook his head, his eyes pitying. "More fool you, Thor. I have laid no trap, I would take a dagger in my breast without complaint this very moment. My ambitions have ceased. You understand nothing."

"I understand you can bring her only pain." Her pitiful nature would profit her naught but suffering in this case, Thor was certain. Jane was too kind.

Sinking back into the sand, Loki tipped his chin up and smiled grimly at the sky. "There you have me, brother. There you have me."

Thor did not know, and was consumed with a dreadful suspicion that he did not wish to know, what had passed between Jane Foster and his brother, but he knew he couldn't trust it and needed to break it quickly. Loki could not be left here in any sense, in any trace, unguarded and without curtail. He was too fractious, licking his wounds and lashing out; there was no telling what he might do.

"Then charge your bridge. Return with me to Asgard. Be my brother again and I will know I can begin to forgive you."

Loki's eyes rolled over to him, big and almost frightened, like a war dog fighting the lead.

Jane sprawled on the couch, listening to Darcy move around the kitchen looking for something edible to have as a snack. There wasn't a lot. Jane didn't know if she'd even be able to eat if there were. The world still seemed to be spinning a bit too fast.

She had a terrible feeling about Loki and Thor being left alone together and a worse one about what might happen while both her alien bodyguards were off the reservation, possibly never to return.

She twisted at her pinky, telling herself she didn't believe they would do that to her.

"What are we gonna do about dinner?" Darcy wondered aloud. "You can't take the Clash of the Titans to the bar."

"It seems like Loki can dress himself in whatever he wants with his invisible magic wand, and Thor could wear some of Erik's stuff," Jane mumbled from under the arm she'd thrown across her head. "Unless you meant the yelling and potential for violence, but it's not like that's out of place on a Thursday night at the local dive as long as no one goes around calling down thunderstorms and shooting laser beams out of their-"
"Did you see that?" Darcy's tone was urgent and completely serious.

Jane sat up so fast her head spun. "What? Where?"

Darcy was peering out of the windows facing the desert. "Flashes- purple smoke, maybe?"

"For fuck's sake!" Jane scrambled for her shoes, her heartbeat like an out of tune timpani being played inside her skull by a rabid chimp. "For fuck's sake, Darcy, if he- if he…!

Darcy blinked at her, alarmed. "Which one? If he what?"

Jane grabbed her by the sleeve and started dragging. "Van, now. Now."

They wobbled across the desert, absolutely shredding the suspension with a careening pace which had Darcy gripping the handle above her door in white-knuckled terror and whimpering a little every time Jane got more than five seconds of hang time off a bump.

"You know, it'd be nice to know what I'm dying for this time!" she yelled over the clanking of equipment and the dull roar of the tires. "Are they fighting? Is that what that light is?"

"Worse!" Jane shouted, too focussed on her mission for more than one syllable.

"Worse?" Darcy repeated, apparently failing to imagine what could be worse.

"I'll kill him if I'm right. I will kill him."

"Okay, bit scared now."

"I better be wrong!" Jane fumed, not caring as she ran over some shrubs.

"Yeah," Darcy agreed, shell shocked, "yeah, I think you'd better be."

Jane just cranked the wheel as they drew up beside the bridge device and the van drifted sideways a good three metres before it stopped. Sparks of colour were flaring from the spindle of the worm hole projector and arcing back towards the shallow dish at the base. A familiar ozone, petrichor type smell hit her like a slap as she threw her door open and ran towards the two figures standing at her machine. And to think she'd loved that smell, the smell of Loki's magic.

"Hey!" she screamed.

Both heads turned towards her, Thor trying an awkward smile and Loki lifting his hands in a defensive posture with a look on his face that said he knew exactly what she was pissed about.

"Jane, if you would allow me to..." he began in a placating voice as she stomped up to him.

"No!" She thrust an accusing finger into his face. "How dare you? After everything I've put up with from you and everything you watched me put up with from Erik, after how many God damned conversations about not just fucking off out of nowhere and seriously not making decisions for me? I thought you understood, I really-"

"Please, Jane," Thor interjected in a 'isn't this silly, can't we all just be sensible?' type of tone which made her even more furious than she already was, "you must-"

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She pushed an open hand towards his face as if she would just clap it over his mouth. "Shut up, Thor. I'm not mad at you, not relatively speaking. You probably think you're doing the best thing for everyone and blah blah blah responsible and I can't really blame you for thinking so. But you," she
rounded on Loki again, grabbing handfuls of his shirt and trying to pull him down to her level so she could yell at him better, "you know me better than that, you know exactly how I feel about this patronising-"

"Jane." Loki lifted his hands to cup her cheeks, and she was so surprised that he was touching her like this in front of other people that she let him get a word in. "I was not going to leave."

She shook her head in his hold. "Don't even try to… you weren't?"

She looked over at Thor. His face was set in an inscrutable mask, but he nodded in confirmation.

Jane stared up at Loki again, his eyes were bright and hopeful, a slight curve pulling at his lips. He nodded too, trying to reassure her. "We should have warned you, Thor wished to send a message and I..."

She was breathing too heavy, she was crying and everything was stupid. "I thought you were abandoning the work."

He shook his head, his thumbs wiping her tears away.

She clenched her eyes closed, making more spill down her face. She hated that she was crying. Just because she was angry. So annoying to cry when you were angry and make everyone think you were being dramatic. Her voice was very small when she added, "I thought you were gonna leave me."

"No, Jane."

"Would have killed you."

"Quite right."

He smiled at her and she started to roll up onto her tiptoes, started stretching her neck to reach his mouth and kiss him until the whole muddled world melted away, when she remembered that Thor was standing right there and dropped to her heels and stepped away and knew it was much too late.
She and Loki stared at each other in mutual discombobulation, then he closed his eyes and grimaced. Well, she definitely couldn't blame him for being pessimistic on this one. She'd been inches from guaranteeing that the dirty laundry was well and truly aired in front of the worst possible audience, and there was zero chance said audience hadn't guessed exactly what was going on. No way could she play this off. Even just the practically weeping in Loki's arms part would have been a tough sell in retrospect.

Jane wouldn't have done this to Thor in a million years if she'd been thinking straight, this was no way for him to find out, rubbing his face in it out of nowhere. God, she wanted to believe she would have sat him down and told him properly if there had been time and it was safe to do so, if she'd felt completely certain it was going to keep being an issue long enough to make the meltdown worthwhile. No denying there was something to tell, but with the rest of the drama it had seemed a minor point.

"Thor, I..." she risked looking at him, groping for something to say, but he only had eyes for Loki and his face was utterly closed off.

"Even when you threatened it," Thor said, his voice low and rough but getting louder with every word as his control frayed, "even in my anger, I tried not to believe it of you! I tried to think you would never slither so low on your belly that you..."

Thor's raging became a wordless cry and he charged Loki like a linebacker going for a tackle. Loki neatly avoided the blow with a pivot just as it would have landed, grabbed Thor's outside arm and rolled him ass over tea kettle into the sand with his own momentum. Thor bounced back up in seconds and seized Loki by his shirt collar before he could get out of the way again.

"Stop it!" Jane shrieked, horrified at how quickly violence had erupted and how out of her control it was.

"Coward, you asked me!" Thor scoffed, raising the hammer, "That is too generous a word for what you are!"

Loki turned his wrists and grasped at the air as a spear materialised into his hands, the shaft pressing up under Mjolnir's head, ready to fend off the attack if it fell. Infuriatingly, he said nothing at all.

"Wielding a mortal woman scholar as your shiv in my back, can you be...

"Shut up!"

"...be the brother who bled with me in battle? Can you then bewitch-"

"Shut up!" she screamed again, this time at the most ear piercing pitch she could manage.

Thor froze for a moment, a crease of confusion forming in his brow before it was blotted out by a new wave of fury. "Heimdall knew!"

He shoved Loki away from him and they both lifted their weapons, circling each other with intent stares, probing each other's guards occasionally. Loki looked catastrophically undefended in his normal, purely decorative human dress shirt and trousers- no armour, no shield- facing Thor's massive bulk of metal and cape and hammer.
"I thought he might," Loki said, sounding remarkably unconcerned and unruffled by the fight. "A most unfortunate mistake. I let my guard down."

The same 'mistake' which had given SHIELD an earful, and she knew exactly what had distracted him so much. It was funny how her desire to make out with him was turning out to be such a pivotal issue. Funny in a terrifying sort of way.

"Thor, please listen, I'm so sorry you had to find out like this," she started cautiously, slowly moving closer, preparing herself to get between them and grab at the hammer.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he demanded, his eyes sliding back and forth as he split his attention in monitoring her movements and following Loki.

Jane was offended and she was scared and this was going to stop. "Of course I do! He's not Svengali!"

"I have heard tell of magic which breaks the will," Thor said, blowing right past the Svengali comment, which Jane now remembered was an unhelpfully human reference.

"Don't be absurd," Loki chastised, the butt of the spear nudging Mjolnir as it edged too close. "Do you imagine power of that kind is so easy to come by?"

"Lies, then, honeyed words! You lured Laufey into the heartland of his greatest foe-"

"And it was child's play! Odin's chamber was the place he wanted most to be in the universe, his hatred rendered him as blind as your arrogance does you. He trusted my ambition because he saw himself reflected there, any idiot could have likewise turned him to their purpose. Jane's will could stop this world from turning, honeyed words would not break it if they were spoken ceaselessly until Asgard falls."

Jane and Thor both stared at him.

Then Thor turned to her, caught between accusation and helplessness.

"I never could have stolen her affections," Loki went on conversationally, but there was a slight crack in his voice and she knew something wasn't copesetic, "pity is not affection."

"You admit you tried!" Thor growled, not letting himself be swayed from the point.

"I admit I considered it." Loki glanced at her and quickly away again when he found her looking back. "I considered it and was too tired."

Jane's throat seemed full of razorblades, her hands curled at her sides.

"What of your words to me today? That your place here was in the likeness of a trade agreement between you, that you were honour bound to fulfil your part in her science and it was the business of that deal which keeps you at her side until she has completed her study."

"I did swear an oath. It was not business."

Thor startled as he watched his brother, apparently seeing something he hadn't expected.

Loki set his jaw and tipped his head back defiantly. "It is not honour, either."

Thor went suddenly to Jane, beside her before she was finished noticing he was moving, his free hand gathering her close to him in an utterly irresistible grip.
"Hey!" she protested, "Let me go!"

"Jane Foster," he said softly, his mouth just above her ear, his eyes still tracking his opponent, "even if this could be trusted, and he has laboured earnestly to erode such faith in his word, you do not want his devotion. It is a fire which burns."

Loki was there in a flash, the spear was clashing against Mjolnir and he was snarling in Thor's face, then he was gone again, retreating to a safe distance. He panted, clearly more from upset than exertion, watching Jane for signs of how she would react to what Thor was whispering to her.

Thor's grip tightened on her shoulder, pushing her slightly behind him and against his side under his arm. "I have every regret for the part I played in it, Jane, but still his loyalty has a death toll. For love of our father, he--"

"Let her go, Thor," Loki said, his delivery crisp, "they are fragile creatures."

"If this is sincerity, it is as like to be dangerous as any lie."

"Get down!" Loki threw the spear through the air above her head and as Thor released her to swat at it, another projectile clipped him in the ribs and he staggered back a step. She dove towards the sand, aiming for a graceful roll to break her fall and managing to only half eat shit. As soon as she was clear, the thunderclap and searing twister of light that was the wormhole enclosed and swallowed Thor. When the dust cleared, he was gone.

Jane blinked the stars out of her eyes and stared at Loki in shock. "Did you do that?"

He nodded gravely, his lips pursed.

"You sent him back to Asgard?"

Another nod.

Jane let out a breath and stood up, slapping sand out of her jeans and sweater. "Well, okay then."

"You are not displeased?" He sounded surprised.

"Not really." She frowned at her shoes, annoyed she hadn't thought to do something like kick Thor in the shin and break the deadlock. Then she could have talked him down instead of tossing him off the planet like it wasn't a semi-understandable reaction she could have easily predicted. "Situation was getting a bit out of hand."

Loki suppressed a smile, his dimples winking in and out of existence. He really looked like he'd been through the wars now, missing the first three buttons on his shirt, covered in sand, his hair a mad tangle of wind tossed curls. Definitely the most unkempt she'd ever seen him. It made him possibly even more relentlessly gorgeous than usual.

"Plan for that eventuality, did you?" she said, sizing him up. It was a thing he would do.

"Not precisely. Even my so-called 'super genius' bestows only limited clairvoyance. I primed the bridge for other reasons, but it didn't escape my attention that something of this kind might happen."

"Right." She put her hands on her hips. "What other reasons?"

"I began to tell you before, Thor wished to send a message directly and I did not object, but there was more. I have feared for some time it would be a problem, and those fears were not unfounded.
You recall I thought that your human alloys and primitive construction methods may perhaps be too flimsy to long withstand the power of the bifrost?"

"Yeah." She'd told him he was being a snobby hyper advanced alien, her predictive models said it'd be fine.

"They are," he announced with a palpable smug air of 'I am being the bigger person and not saying I told you so but I told you so'. "The device can survive likely two or three further activations before it sustains any potentially serious structural fatigue, but cascade failure could be abrupt and I would recommend with complete confidence only one."

"One!" Jane's mind reeled, her happy little plan B of at least running a full barrage of tests from the ground if more ambitious ideas became too infeasible shattering. What did that actually leave her with? "But..."

Loki folded his hands in front of him, using the careful, affectedly breezy tone which meant he was laying track for something, "I have supposed all this while that the culmination of your work would be to use the bridge yourself, to see Asgard, walk the soil of another world. Am I correct in thinking so?"

Jane eyeballed him warily, not sure what he could be nervous about at this point. "Well you're not wrong, anyway. Ultimately, I'm- um- theoretically an academic and, you know, as an academic it was all about proving that my theories are a valid direction for further research, and it's more about the fact that the machine is possible in the first place than it is really going somewhere through it."

"Very well, Dr. Foster, academic. What of 'as Jane'?" There was something terribly serious in his eyes, but a deliberate warmth and lightness in his voice. "Jane Foster, incorrigible human? What is her end?"

She shrugged sheepishly. "Well, obviously I fully intended to throw myself into the void the second I was half-sure I was going to come out okay on the other side and I can barely imagine it without passing out from excitement, if that's what you mean." Her enthusiasm dimmed. "But I guess it's not really on the cards, is it?"

Loki threaded his fingers together, his thumbs rolling over each other. "The device can still transport you to Asgard perfectly safely. Your glory is there to be seized at leisure."

She shook her head. "You said one trip, that's a one way ticket and I have to get back. There's no bridge operational on the other side, even if someone stayed here to man this machine- and, I mean, if it weren't also over the safety threshold, maybe I could see myself risking it and asking Erik to help, but I don't... I don't think it's justifiable to compound risks crazily and potentially endanger the whole planet just for my own satisfaction."

More almost-realised dreams for Jane's giant pile of almosts.

"I'd meant to tell you when next we met," Loki said, like he'd just remembered- which she kind of doubted, "I looked in on Erik Selvig."

Jane paused, slightly worried by the sudden change of subject. "You did? You mean when you left the lab earlier?"

He flicked his hand towards her in confirmation. "I found him brooding over his portable computer in the public library. SHIELD is watching him, but they have not directly interfered with his habits. No electronic ears, only an armed shadow who kept her distance."
She wondered if that should make her feel better or not. It might mean he'd taken some of her reprimand to heart and was waiting at the sidelines in case she decided to call him, or it might mean he'd told SHIELD everything and they had no further use for him at the moment.

"He seemed good?"

"He looked weary, but otherwise well."

She'd bet he was weary. God, why did everything have to cut two ways?

"Thank you," she said, reaching out to touch his arm, "that was really thoughtful of you. I'm... Loki, I'm sorry I did that in front of Thor. I wasn't thinking and now..."

Loki chewed at his bottom lip and let it slowly pull back through his teeth, his eyebrows drawn together and quirked up in the middle. She waited.

"If we use your bridge to go to Asgard," he paused to clear his throat, trying to sound careless and casual and patently failing, "my abilities are such... I don't need the bifrost. I can bring you back myself."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she played along, pretending not to immediately see this for what it was. "What are you saying?"

"It wouldn't matter- the risk they will not complete repairs, the strain on the device here, it doesn't matter. The secret paths are eternal, we can travel those."

"Secret paths only you know," she said, trying to draw him out.

He looked squirrelly, rubbing his left wrist like he'd been shackled. "Yes."

"That even the all-seeing Asgardian Illuminati can't find- just you."

Now his chin drifted down towards his chest, he was gazing at her keenly from beneath his brow, shadows making the angles of his face more pronounced. "Yes."

"But they'll definitely work no matter what? No one can... close them down?"

God damn it, that face of his could break her heart. "No one else has ever found them."

She held her breath, feeling the weight of two worlds on her shoulders. This was it. All the times she'd ever thought 'this is it' in her life, she'd been wrong. This was the it.

"Can I think about it?" She tilted her head and tried to smile disarmingly.

Loki's lips twitched and then he nodded swiftly, some of his painfully rigid posture relaxing.

"Where will you be?"

He smiled, only the tiniest bit tremulously. "Afraid opportunity will yet slip away from you, Jane? Fear not, I shall be here."

"Right here?" She pointed at the ground, raising an eyebrow. "Did you just sleep in the desert all those months you weren't staying at the lab?"

"Not always. Not mostly."
She drifted closer as his answer sank in volume to muttering under his breath, letting herself grin at his evasiveness.

"I'm trying to imagine you as a camper. I have to say, it's not coming naturally."

"I wouldn't think you would object to sleeping rough beneath the stars, Jane Foster." He didn't sound defensive, but she wasn't sure if she detected a note of teasing or not. "I am no stranger to it. It is perfectly enjoyable, to be surrounded by the dark as deep as the roots of Yggdrasil and the glitter of other worlds in the firmament. Silence has always been the most constant of my companions."

Her hands slid along his forearms, her head falling back to look up at him. "Part of your culture of one?"

"I want to take you to Asgard, Jane Foster. I want to watch you see it, to see it with you. And I will wait; yes, right here."

Her fingers trailed up his throat, slipping around the base of his skull and giving a tiny pull. He bent his head and this time she let herself strain all the way up onto her toes, arching her neck to meet his mouth with hers. He kissed her very carefully, his hand barely touching her cheek and the artful press of his lips delicate and fleeting. She wanted to push forward, to surrender caution, but knew she couldn't, and though his arm supported her, he made no move to pull her close, to lift her up. Her skin burned and tears threatened; it felt as if letting go of him would mean the world ending.

Long before she was ready, he pulled away, his hands gently guiding her back down to her heels. She gasped for breath, feeling as if she couldn't catch it, her field of vision completely full of his pale blue eyes.

"Until then," he said. She felt the deep vibration of his voice where her left hand rested over his heart.

"Yeah. Until then." Spinny, spinny, spinny. Shouldn't have kissed him, what are you doing, no reasonableness in a three billion mile radius.

She drew herself away with greatest reluctance, staring back over her shoulder no less than five times as she trudged to the van. He stood there motionless, just watching, his long hair stirred by the wind.

"Yeah, I'm gonna have to say I called it," Darcy said dryly when she opened the door to get in.

Jane clutched her hand to her chest in fright. "Fuck! I completely forgot you were here."

"Oh, really? I'm shocked. Wonder why?"

"Do not start, I am having the longest day anyone has ever had. What were you doing?"

Darcy snorted as Jane climbed into the driver's seat. "Are you kidding? I was waiting out the carnage. Like I'm going to jump in that ring before absolutely necessary. Enough people were yelling. Look at it this way, you wouldn't have gotten to make out with your semi-evil boyfriend if I were over there."

"He is not...! Oh, shut up."

"Okay, I'm confused. What were we originally going to do if not charge right in like idiots? That was always the impression I got. I mean, if you'd had the thing up and running a month after Thor left, I
figured we would turn it on and bring him back and then we'd all go through. Of course, I'm assuming he'd tell us stuff was cool on the other side. What was your plan?"

Jane handed Darcy her cup of tea and sank heavily into one of the kitchen chairs, clutching her own cup for dear life. That was just the freaking trouble wasn't it, she hadn't had a plan. Now everything was mixed up and nothing she could do in her mental elimination game could make it straightforward again, because it never actually was straightforward.

"I guess that's what I thought, too," she said, not sure any more what she had thought. "Or maybe that… I don't know, I was laser focussed on building the thing, I didn't even worry about it. I was so confident and excited at first, it felt like it would all fall into place."

"Yeah, and then it didn't and you went for the full funk."

Jane took a sip of tea which burned her tongue and winced. "Obviously I wanted to go there- I still want to go there, that's a no brainer- but is it really a good idea? Assume getting there and back is no problem, do you think the whole thing is, in itself, something I should do?"

"Really? You're asking me?" Darcy twisted her face up. "Are you really going to listen if I say it isn't?"

"Are you saying that?"

"No." She wrinkled her nose and squinted, as if Jane were suggesting they swallow spiders or something. "I just- it doesn't seem like you to even stop and seriously consider not doing it."

"Hey, I have a sense of responsibility, okay. It exists, I'm not a train wreck." Well. Maybe that was debatable on a couple levels. She soldiered on, "I feel like maybe there should be some kind of official representative of, not mankind, because I guess that could be me, but like global governments, and someone trained for… I don't know, exploration and foreign diplomacy. And non-interference with other cultures. Or something."

Darcy laughed shortly. "Are you having a crisis right now?"

"Tiny one, maybe. These are really powerful people, not just Thor and Loki, but their dad is super important and seems like he can do almost anything. What if I screw up? Really bad? Thor is half-convinced I've been brainwashed, the entire ethos of the place has some real shady patches from the sound of it, there's the small matter of that major catastrophe the guy I'd be going with caused - what if…?"

"But Loki said he could sneak you out the back door. And he said his family are galactic peacekeepers or whatever and we're too tiny and helpless for them to do anything other than babysit us. And-and, Thor said he'd be our guardian angel if we needed one and he's still in their good books. Or back in them."

Jane blew her breath out through her teeth. "So you think it's cool as far as the whole dangerous aliens and space politics thing goes?"

"I mean, I'm trying hard to play devil's advocate for myself here, but this is a professional opportunity beyond what I could have imagined in my wildest dreams and as a scientist, in a spirit of inquiry, I feel like I have basically a moral obligation to take it unless I'm very sure it's indefensibly
dangerous. Jane faltered. "But also, if I'm making that argument, it means nothing to science or humanity for me to go if I don't make it back. So it boils down to what it's really about, and the truth is that it's really about him. It's about: do I believe he can and will get me home?"

Darcy hesitated, probably not sure what to say, or maybe not wanting to tackle all of that ramble at once. "Well, do you think they'll lock him up if he shows his face? Is that the level of friction?"

"I don't know," Jane said honestly, taken off guard by the question and sure she was being talked around to something. She pushed her hair out of the way and scratched at her forehead, searching the ceiling for some kind of divine guidance. "You know, I doubt it, I doubt it a lot. Thor was ecstatic to see him until he ruined the moment, and he is a prince and everything. And I'm kind of confident he wouldn't let them anyway, even if they tried. Not that it doesn't worry me a little, but…"

Darcy watched her struggle, looking mussed and tired but surprisingly patient.

Jane decided to talk to her tea, following little ripples on the surface as she disturbed it by fidgeting with her fingers around the cup. "He's asking me to trust him. Absolutely any of my work meaning anything, ever seeing my friends and family again, seeing my whole literal world again- that would be on him. In both a very literal and in a metaphorical way, he's asking me to put my life in his hands."

"So he's testing you."

She shook her head. "It's not a test. It's… it's more like an invitation. This is… for him, this is the biggest and hardest thing that he could ask."

The hum of the lab computers battled with a cricket to fill the silence. Darcy took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, leaning so far forward that her dark hair fell around her like a curtain.

"Do I sound that crazy?" Jane asked. "More than usual?"

Waving a hand in denial, Darcy sat up and tucked her bangs behind her ear. "It's not that. Like, don't worry about crazy. It's just, I told you I was out of my depth with this stuff. I don't know, Jane. If you think he's putting himself way out there, then you're probably right. The question doesn't really change whether he is or not, and the question is still: do you trust him that much?"

That was definitely it and it was the it which was going to decide the rest of her life, one way or another, and she was terrified. She'd never been this far outside of her comfort zone, ever. She pressed her lips together, hard, and swallowed around the lump in her throat.

"You know, I want to so bad, but it seems like that can't be the right choice. Thor said… but it was nothing I didn't already know, no matter what he thinks. It's not like it doesn't get to me, but it also doesn't make nearly as much difference as… I've just been dealing and dealing with these bombshells as they come and shouldn't I be a lot… more… something?"

Darcy dismissed that, "You feel however you feel. This isn't some craziness you threw yourself into on a- well, it is, but you know what I mean. You've been more or less living with this guy for a long time now, and the fact that you were barely shocked finding out all this bonkers shit really says something about how not over your eyes the wool ever was. I think you know how you really feel."

Jane snuffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve. Her eyes were burning no matter how fast she blinked.

"I thought you'd just do it, you know, full speed ahead no matter what. For science!"

She nodded, blinking frantically. "I would! But I can't..."
Darcy's eyebrows rose.

"He knows what he asked, okay."

"Right..." She leaned on the table, hanging on Jane's words. "And?"

Jane's lip wobbled and then the flood came, tears streaking down her cheeks as quickly as she could wipe them away. "I'm not crying."

"Sure."

"I know it sounds incredibly stupid, I really know, and I definitely need to work on my life choices, but I have never felt like this and I cannot sit around and watch him implode."

Looking a little shaken, Darcy glanced around uncertainly before getting up to cross the table and pat Jane on the shoulder. "It's... it's okay, boss. Hey. It's okay. You wanted to go through anyway. Just go."

"I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what he's expecting when he gets there, whether he has some plan to deal with everything, but I know a part of him wishes he was actually going home, back to his life. He just wants to be who he used to be- and he can't. He'll have to see his father, and God only knows what that'll be like. I can't bail on all this emotional crap, and I can't help him avoid the reality of what he did."

Darcy's hand rubbed circles over her back, the awkward comfort all she was able to offer.

"Is there the slightest chance this won't end in tears?"

"What do you think?" Darcy said, deflecting responsibility to her again.

She stared through her fingers at the table, wanting to believe things weren't as impossibly fucked up as they appeared, that there might be a way forward. "I can't go unless I mean it. I refuse to use him. You know, on principle, but also because it seems like everyone in his life always has. And I need for him to be okay."

"Does that mean that he has to go back or that he shouldn't?"

"It means..." Jane slumped down in her chair and finally looked up at Darcy's worried, inquisitive face hovering over her. "It means I only tell him that I trust him if I actually do, and then I tell him we don't have to go for my sake even though I trust him- he can stay right here where his biggest problem is SHIELD and be my research partner for as long as he wants."

"Are you going to tell him you'll take his side if he wants to argue with Thor some more?"

Jane felt the tiniest stirrings of a smile, but her answer was dead serious because it was too important to gloss over, "I only take his side when he's right."

"Duh," Darcy said with mock offence. "And you're totally objective, of course."

She did smile then. "Well, I guess there's taking a side and there's being on a side. I can be whichever is the one where I still let him know when he's being a prick."
Flight

It had been a long night and a slow morning, and tired as she was, she still hadn't managed to sleep
much. Knowing that Darcy was around to make her a nearly lethal cup of coffee was probably the
only thing which had allowed her the strength to stagger out of her trailer before noon. The caffeine
was definitely the only thing keeping her on task. To the extent that she was on task, that is.

When she found herself fussing with her hair and trying out more than one shade of lip gloss, she
knew it was long past time to ask her intern to drop her off at the bifrost site. She didn't feel fit to
drive, she was a danger to herself and others behind that wheel at the best of times, and taking this
out there with no escape route probably gave her better odds on not chickening out.

The mid-morning sun glinted on the metal components in her machine, its tall bulk thrusting up out
of the sand like a sentry tower, a mute witness.

Loki was sitting cross-legged on the ground nearby, his hands stretched out behind him and his face
turned up as if he were sunbathing. Jane was fairly convinced it wasn't actually possible for him to
tan- either that or sunscreen technology had come a long way on Asgard- or she'd think he was
working on it. His shirt had changed from white to black, but he still wore the first few buttons
unbuttoned and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. She wondered if he'd been doing something,
working magic maybe, or if this was some new picture he was painting for her benefit. A careless
and ordinary type of picture.

Jane chewed her lip a little as she walked up behind him, standing over him hesitantly. He knew she
was there, his nose crinkling as she blocked his sun, but he didn't open his eyes. She bent down to
put her hands on his shoulders, dropping to her knees in the sand at his back when he straightened up
under the touch, and resting them there a moment while she breathed deeply and contemplated
appropriate ice breakers. Then she slid her fingers into his hair. She swept it back from his face and
gathered it at the base of his skull, on impulse tugging the elastic out of her own hair to secure a
ponytail.

Loki allowed this without complaint, then he turned and raised an eyebrow at her over his shoulder,
his mouth pursed in disapproval but a tell-tale dimple appearing in his right cheek.

"Keeps it out of your face when you're busy," she said quickly.

The eyebrow arched even more incredulously, his eyes flicking to her own nearly-always-loose and
often-in-her-mouth hair. "Really? How interesting. And here was I, having somehow lived this long
without ever having learnt that."

Well, it was actually still getting in his face even as he said so, the wind had tossed some wisps too
short to be contained by the elastic across his forehead.

She smiled sheepishly. "Do you mind?"

He faltered, looking into the middle distance with a comic frown as he ran his hand over the
unfamiliar style. "I suppose not."

"Good." She smoothed her fingers over his brow and tucked the loose hair behind his ear. "Because
I like it on you."

His mouth twitched, his eyes sliding away from hers.
"Yes, really. Anyway, you guys wear braids at home, don't you? Thor was, I noticed."

"Most do," he said uneasily, clearly keen that she change the subject.

"You never have." She should change the subject, she certainly didn't come here to talk to him about fashion- but she still hadn't figured out what to say.

"It hasn't been long enough of late. I cut it off some time ago. Mother tutted over it, but I could hardly look less fitting for my part for that."

Jane pouted in thought, letting her gaze travel over him again. She tried to imagine his world, his context, to see in him some glimpse of the terrible consuming lack he saw so readily in himself. His clever hands were clasped over his raised knee, long and narrow with their graceful fingers she'd seen command wonders out of thin air and coax elegant cohesion from disparate components. To her, they were almost unbearably attractive, both inherently beautiful in their form and representative of the beauty of which he was capable.

Muscles shifted in his lithe arms and across his chest as he adjusted his grip and she wondered if he could possibly be looked down on quite as much as he thought. He was obviously fit, obviously strong, still huge and solidly built if not quite as gargantuan as Thor, and he fought hand-to-hand with a skill even her clueless eye could appreciate- wasn't that enough for his physical, warrior culture? How much more could you ask of a soldier? Even if he were only human, she was confident he would easily be able to take any person of her acquaintance with one hand tied behind his back.

And, honestly, his hair was glorious. The depth of the black against his fair skin, the perfect way it framed his face when he didn't shellac it down, the curl at the ends- what did he think was so terrible about that? Who'd told him it was?

"I like the way you look," was all she said, Queen of Understatement.

"Thor had been gone some time when I arrived here."

Jane rolled her eyes so hard she worried she'd pull something. "You dick. You really think…?"

He tipped his chin at her and she could have decked him.

"You are not sucking me into this petty rivalry bullshit if you insinuate until you're blue in the face. I'm a grown up. Seriously, what do you think is going on here, anyway?"

Loki opened his hands, not quite shrugging. "I have abandoned the hope of knowing. A madwoman was pawing at me unprovoked, then it was all riveting discussion of Asgardian coiffure."

She had to laugh, blushing a little that he was calling her on it, and he smiled.

His gaze fell along with his smile. "Jane, I… to recruit you against Thor as a weapon- you know the accusation was not without justice, and before you tell me of your decision, I want you to…. The only true power I have ever had, has been in the use of my intellect, to turn whatever force I could to my advantage without being seen or heard. Anyone can be a pawn. I did not wish to be any longer."

"I know." She sighed, leaning her head on her fist. She might have anticipated he wouldn't just let her stall forever. "I really wasn't… I mean, you know what that's like from the other side. Why perpetuate it?"

"The things I thought were important… it had always seemed a fair trade. At times I felt justified, at
times I thought nothing of consequences. My father's words on the subject and his actions taught quite different lessons- I must warn you, the house of Odin is full of hypocrites."

Jane stewed a moment, not certain what she wanted to push. "Why didn't you ever include him- your father- when you were telling me stuff in… I guess, code, is a way of putting it. When you were translating your past to Africa?"

He sucked at the inside of his cheek and she knew it still wasn't at all a safe subject.

"I mean, you talked quite a bit about your mother."

His gaze flashed to her and away. "My mother-" he stopped, his heated retort cut short.

"You didn't have to prove yourself to her?" It was a guess, but she considered it a good one.

"Of course I did," he snapped, then winced and took a steadying breath. "But she, perhaps foolishly, also saw the use of me just as I was. She taught me magic as a child. If it is so distasteful, I don't see…"

"Well, what's supposed to be wrong with magic? According to Thor, it's in the same category as science at your place. I'm thinking that's because it actually is science, but let's not fight."

Loki indulged her with a wry look, but he was fidgety and breathing a bit too shallow for her to believe he was relaxed. "It occupies much of the same… shall we say utility? Discourse? It is a matter of careful, cloistered study to achieve understanding, but the mundane and ignorant use of it extends to the lowliest sectors of society. Our magical technology, as you would call it, is perfectly of a piece with ordinary weapons in the life of a warrior, for example. A SHIELD agent uses a gun, he does not design and build one. He likely has only the vaguest idea of how it works."

"With you so far," she encouraged.

"Thor uses Mjolnir, Mjolnir is made up of great power and channels magic, but Thor does not do magic- the hammer is a dumb tool, it responds without effort. Theory, musty books, misdirection, indirect engagement- that is the stuff of personal magic, living magic which challenges the will of the caster. I do personal magic. I take a dim view of berserker battles, I would prefer not to die senselessly, I am of the opinion that good tactics can be used to avoid fighting altogether. This isn't having slightly more cleverness than a rock, this is cowardice, trickery. Deception. Effeminate. So it goes."

"You don't have scholars? Engineers? Architects? Those people aren't respected?"

He squinted one eye and half-smiled at her, slightly amused and slightly mocking. "So quick, Jane Foster, but missing the obvious."

"What's obvious?" she protested, raising her eyebrows.

"You so often forget, perhaps I should be offended. I wasn't born free as some third son of a rich minor house, my life a leisurely stroll in whatever direction took my fancy, dutiful brothers carrying the burden of glory if I should skive off to ply a trade. I was a prince."

She did tend to block it out. It was one of those things she was still coming to terms with. "Princes can't be academics?"

"They can, so long as they don't show it too badly." He shot her a pained grin. "Certainly I was expected to learn and to act as Thor's advisor in the more boring matters of state, but I was also
expected to be a proper son of Odin and it was there that I fell short. I don't find there is such a fine
line between bravery and idiocy in my character, and that begets wiliness, which is tantamount to
treachery. Magic of my kind on the field of battle is inherently dishonest, for women and elves. My
mother liked to teach me, I had thought she was proud..."

Jane felt helpless, wanting to offer something but floundering to make sense of it all. "You know, not
presuming to tell you your business or anything, but if she and your dad thought you could keep
Thor in line, that seems like thinking an awful lot of you. I'm an only child, but I've had friends who
were 'the responsible one' and sometimes... I mean, do you think it's possible she worried about you
less because she was proud and she took you for granted?"

He looked at her hollowly, an echoing emptiness his only expression.

"That doesn't... not that that makes it better. Erik made me... I'm not saying it's okay for them to
make you feel like you had to...."

His fingers clenched and unclenched around his wrist, the skin going red under the force of his grip.
"I tried to do what he would have done, I tried to be the son he would have wanted. As always, it
was my methods which were objectionable."

Something shifted in her chest, a cloak of heaviness, like pins and needles, settling itself invisibly
around her shoulders. She folded her hands one around the other, hanging on to herself for dear life.
"But you know that... you don't think...?"

He looked almost aged by his grimace, the pull of his frown making temporary lines crease his face.
"Finally your misplaced confidence in me begins to erode?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, ready to come out swinging.

"I could never have a place there so long as Thor lived- I thought such thoughts often."

Soul-sick and angry, she shook her head. "Please don't do this now. Don't try to push me away."

His eyes widened, his voice was full of sincerity, "I'm not. I want you to understand. When I most
tried to live up to the ideal which was expected of me, I became a horror- to myself more than to
anyone else. I don't wish to be a monster, but it seems it cannot be avoided. Attempting to deny my
blood only proved it to be true."

"No," she said, softly but insistently, "no, that isn't what happened."

"How can I trust myself?"

Jane rubbed her hands over her face, pulling the skin until the stretch was painful. She was here, she
was in this, she couldn't do anything but move forward. "Okay, you asked me once about my dad
and why I didn't do what he wanted me to do with my life, and I get what we were really talking
about now. I get why you need to know. Because it's my life and he loved me- he'd want me to be
happy, he'd be proud that... and... like, it doesn't matter that.... Let me try again; forget that, let me
try again.

"Loki, it doesn't matter what people want for you or from you, if... you're the one who has to live
with your decisions. You're the one who has to look yourself in the eye in the mirror. If you thought
it was wrong, you shouldn't have done it."

Despair seemed to shrivel him, shrink him. "You do not understand."
"What? What is it that I don't understand? I want to!"

"I was trying to be good! What they wanted me to be! It was supposed to be right, the way it ended up would have been exactly-"

"But it felt wrong, you never agreed with-"

He hung his head between his raised knees, crossing his hands over the back of his neck. "I barely… I was in a fit. From my cradle, I heard the songs of his heroics, his conquests, and if I could use my talents to his ends, perhaps…! Perhaps there would have been a place for my talents at his side… my own people, my real people… they were never people to us. Do you see, Jane? Can you possibly see?"

She put her hand on his neck, too, pressing down in little soothing circles as his own fingers slowly unclenched and fell away.

"Your race is so soft, so complacent- yet primitive, base, warlike. Are you not confused?"

"Sometimes."

"What of honour? Humans value it?"

"It really doesn't require fighting."

His hand suddenly sprang up and seized her forearm. "Everything I have done, I did..." he stopped, his mouth working soundlessly.

Jane's gaze flicked to his fingers, then back to his face. Horror and devastating vulnerability broke over his expression like a fire catching light.

"In vanity. Selfishness."

She squinted, not following his sudden change of mood.

"What else was it to think winning his favour was so terribly important?" His hand fell away from her and he reached up to squeeze his temples, shielding his eyes from view. "Bor's blood, you should have listened to Thor. Whatever he told you, I'm sure it was nothing but the truth."

She tugged his sleeve until he looked at her. "I came out here to tell you I'll go with you to Asgard, if that's what you want. Nothing you've said about it changes the fact that I know you can get me home again."

He stared at her, his face slack with shock.

"Only if that's what you want. Or you could stay here."

"Stay?" he repeated, like he'd never heard the word before.

"With me," she said firmly, trying not to sound nervous. "You can stay here with me."

He glanced around as though he suspected an ambush, swallowing heavily as he refocussed on her.

"What of your dreams?"

"I built the bridge, didn't I? That was actually more than my original dream." She fiddled with her cuff, the denim on her jacket worn almost to threads. "It was never about going there until..."
He smiled, his eyes too bright. "Until my brother."

The sinking feeling was there again, weighing her down like an anchor, pulling her into the sand. "Loki, none of this has been about Thor for a really long time. I worried about him, but I know he's okay now and... none of it is about him."

He raised an eyebrow again, miserable smile frozen in place.

"You know why I want to go." She nodded slightly, willing him to acknowledge what this was really about. He had known what he was asking her yesterday, and what her saying yes would mean. She was sure of that.

"Impetuous curiosity. It will doom you one day."

"Yeah," she admitted impatiently, her frustration mounting, "but there's something more important right now. I can live with not going. Easily! Gracefully, even. So I want you to know- I want you to fully understand that you absolutely do not have to take me for my sake, because I can absolutely live with not going. My question is: can you? Because for me, I don't have to, but I will. I trust you and I'll go with you, if you need to."

He licked his lips, she could see his chest rising and falling rapidly with his shallow breathing, the V of exposed skin at his collar like a chink in his armour.

"What do you think?" she prompted.

"I decided that it was my wish to take you," he announced crisply, his accent extra prim and his voice theatrically resonant, "so I will."

The eyes which met hers when he turned his head burned. Once again she'd failed to talk him into a corner right when it seemed like he was on the ropes, failed to get acceptance from him on the right terms. "I think," she started, having no idea how to reopen the issue from another direction. It was too important not to try, much too important that they be on the same page.

Loki held up a finger with sharp insistence, his head tilting as he listened to something she could not hear.

Jane glanced around, seeing nothing in any direction, not even the tell tale dust cloud which would give away any approaching car.

His raised index finger slowly curled back into his fist and he pressed his lips together in obvious displeasure. "Our friends again. They have been amassing in greater forces since the bifrost was activated. Nine land vehicles and two helicopters are hidden in the village. They have been given orders to proceed when ready now that Thor has gone. They expect I shall present less challenge in capture and have become confident that I was bluffing."

Like a movie on fast-forward, she vividly imagined about fourteen different ways this latest surprise party could end and every single one of those scenarios had something in it she wasn't prepared to accept. And just when she was learning to be cautious, too. Wasn't that always the way.

"Let's go, then," she said, standing up.

Loki's jaw moved as his gaze followed her rise from his place on the ground, then his teeth clicked as he shut it. "What?"

She stuck her hand out, as if to help him up, though she doubted she could actually handle so much
as a stiff breeze at the moment, the way her knees were trembling. "I said let's go. Fire up the rainbow bridge, Mr Wizard. I can argue just as good in space as here. You'll protect me."

"What of Erik Selvig and Miss Lewis?" he protested, gesturing in the direction of the lab as he rose. "You don't expect SHIELD to give up while you are gone?"

"Erik threw his lot in with them already, and he can take care of himself from the inside, he knows what he's dealing with. Darcy doesn't know anything they don't know and she's not a scientist. You don't disappear someone who'll be missed when they can't even help you. They're not total idiots."

He looked sceptical on this point.

"Overload the bridge before it closes, make sure there's nothing left for them to use. They've got nothing."

"And when you return? They will still be here."

"I'll make a new deal with them. They'd have to catch me first before they could stop me going public. No working prototype, I encrypted all my notes after last time they raided me, Erik gave them everything he had- which wasn't much because he couldn't follow what we were doing. All the cards will be in my hands." She hoped she sounded confident about that, because she was flying by the seat of her pants.

He tapped his lips with his fingertips while she held her breath.

How did this keep getting turned around? How many times was one of them going to end up talking the other into or out of this? They were as bad as each other.

"Yes, I suppose so." He held out his arms as her equipment roared to life behind him, seemingly of its own accord.

Uncertain of what he wanted her to do, she stepped closer and stopped. He nodded very slightly, his hands beckoning, and she walked right up to him, hesitatingly placing her arms around his waist. His hand came up and pressed her head into his chest, shuffling her even closer until she could feel the hard lines of his body tight against hers from head to toe. His muscles were tense under her touch, his skin hot as he channelled magic. Well energy, anyway.

Was she really prepared to believe in magic?

There was a wrenching sensation and she shut her eyes tight, clinging to him for dear life. An explosion like ten million fireworks went off inside her eyelids and reality itself shifted to one side like a car skidding on ice before melting entirely away. The only tangible things in the universe were the death grip of Loki's arms around her and his frantic heartbeat fluttering against her cheek.
At first it was like being yanked upward. The sudden catch of the pull chain on a roller coaster, that violent jolt you could feel in your bones, and it was also sliding, hurtling down a water slide, buffeted by a speed which tugged on your flesh. At the same time, she felt as if she weren't moving at all, the world become a weightless void in which she was the only thing with mass. Her entire sense of gravity was suspended, there was no up, no down, no pull of the earth.

Jane fought against an almost cosmic sensation of heaviness and every screaming instinct of self-preservation so she could open her eyes and lift her head from Loki's chest. Just enough to see.

And seeing was like falling into a light spectrum and an encyclopaedia of satellite photos and a watercolour painting and a model of the circulatory system. A nebula sprang up in her view, engulfed her, and was gone- all in an instant. They soared along a thin vine of lightning which was both all around them and spindly before them like a drawing of a nerve; a twisting rope of stardust and will. Her will. It wasn't pure, wasn't magic, but it was the nearest thing to it in which she could comfortably believe. Definitely the nearest thing of which humanity was capable.

Was that concession enough? He probably wouldn't think so.

All at once they were still, there was an instant of oppressive silence and then a kind of massive rushing in her ears she couldn't immediately identify, her heart was in her throat, the weight of her body felt wrong pressing on her muscles and her sense of balance was completely flabbergasted by the reappearance of gravity. She clutched handfuls of Loki's shirt, still slipping oddly towards the ground until his grip tightened and held her up. Her feet dragged limply and it took a conscious effort to put them under her, to press against them experimentally, waiting for her brain to register the existence of something to stand on.

Starting to find her bearings, she looked up at him and saw his head haloed by the most spectacular night sky she had ever seen or imagined, with more stars than were visible even deep in the desert. Green and pink tendrils of gas cloud wound through it, compact and brilliant with colour here, diffuse and ethereal there, and planets hung in it with a bright shining crystal clarity which had never existed on Earth. Her breath came fast as she stared, tingling springing up over her palms as she longed for something to make this exactly right, the perfect moment. Some way to capture it, to experience it with all the fullness and all the eternity it deserved. A desperate fluttering of excitement and sadness ached in her chest.

Keeping one hand fisted in Loki's shirt for stability, she pulled away to swing around and take in their surroundings. They were at the base of a huge cliff, its glassy black surface glistening wetly with the continuous spray of the colossal waterfalls on either side of the rock face above them. If waterfall was even the word any more when the top curved away into the distance in both directions, an entire ocean pouring over the sharp edge, and the little island they were standing on seeming to be more the exception than the rule. She looked down for the first time, squinting into the blackness and clutching harder when she saw that they weren't so much on an island as on a jetting bit of boulder over an abyss. The mist of the water seemed to roll inward towards the narrowing mass of the planet, repelled by the nothingness of space which was all that was beneath them.

Her brain rebelled and she had to look back at the stars to steady her vertigo. It felt as if she could brush against them, reach out and touch them- almost as if she had, had been them and thought them. Her confusion and terror were made dumb and impotent by the sheer awesomeness of the sight, all other emotion fleeing before the rolling thundercloud of her awe. She tried to swallow the wonder-struck helplessness, tried to find some scientific detachment, to touch earth again- but her scuffed up
desert boots were not supported by earth, they were resting in alien soil on an alien world and an
infinite canopy of alien stars shone over them.

She yanked at Loki, unable to speak and feeling she was still in very real danger of literally falling
over from amazement.

His hand curled around the base of her skull, guiding her upright, helping her find her centre, and she
was able to focus on his eyes, studying her with penetrating interest. The water was deafening and
she had to half read his lips to make out what he said.

"Everything you'd hoped?"

She grinned at him inanely, only now present enough in her own body to realise she was giddy. She
nodded eagerly.

Loki's mouth tugged up at one corner, but his thumb trembled slightly where it stroked the curve of
her jaw. This wasn't an adventure for him, he was home and yet would never be home again.

His gaze fell for a moment, his black eyelashes stark against his milk-pale skin. Drops of water
glittered in the air, she could taste sea salt every time she breathed. Before she could think of
anything to say, he pointed up into the torrent and she followed his finger to where she could just
make out the gleam of gold on some kind of structure. A tiny sliver of it was visible, sitting at the top
of the rock face some eight hundred metres above them. Her mind skidded to a halt and she turned to
stare at him in horror.

He nodded, chuckling at the expression on her face.

*So happy to amuse you,* she thought, mortal terror making her bitter.

He gave her his back and crouched low, beckoning over his shoulder for her to climb on.

Well, it was certainly a novel way to die. No one could say she went out in a boring or mundane
fashion, no one could say her death wasn't fitting to her ridiculous life. Piggyback ride up the side of
some physics defying space disc on the back of an alien prince- that had to be one for the books.
And, you know, there were worse things. Honestly, if this was it, it was a pretty perfect time for it-at
least she could die happy. The inside of the wormhole, for her, was like seeing the face of God.

She shrugged and clamoured onto Loki's back, wrapping one arm under his and the other over his
opposite shoulder so she could cling as tightly as a limpet, locking her hands around her wrists across
his chest. She tucked her legs around his waist when he straightened up, and he reached down to
adjust her hold slightly before jogging up the rocks as spryly as a mountain goat. By the time he was
grabbing nigh-invisible hand holds and hauling them up the vicious, past-vertical slope of the sheer
cliff, all her exposed skin being pelted with icy spray and the water droplets feeling more like tiny
bullets the wetter and colder she got, she couldn't really decide if she wanted to be able to see what
was happening or not. So she alternated between scrunching her eyes tight against his back and
jerking her head around to stare, so wildly that she feared making him lose his balance.

The sound of the water receded very slightly as they crested the edge of the world and Loki stood to
his considerable height. The vista of Asgard spread out before her as she used her legs to push up
against him and get a better view. There were tall, rocky islands by the hundreds, shrouded in mist
and darkness but their magnificent gold buildings still glistering in the abundant starlight, reflecting
the colours of the night sky like a subtle corona. Mountains rose higher and higher in the middle of
the water scape, covered in patches of shadow she assumed were foliage, and the focal point of the
disc was a towering segmented building which looked like the pipes of a gargantuan cathedral organ.
Everything was so vast, so prodigious, it stole her breath. Was she dreaming? Could it really be possible that she wasn't?

Loki's hands covered hers where she gripped her own wrist over his heart. His heavy breathing slowing as he strolled away from the drop, making his way up to more even ground, the labour of the climb apparently forgotten in a few steps. He turned, his head so close to hers that she felt the sweep of his eyelashes against her temple.

"The Realm Eternal, Jane Foster. No mortal has set foot in these hallowed halls in a thousand years." He sighed, closing his eyes as he nudged her cheek with the tip of his nose. "How does it meet with your appetite to sup on wonders?"

They were on another, bigger island, presided over by a tall cylindrical building with a sort of half-dome roof and... things... orbiting it. Things which were floating freely in the air with no obvious means of lift. A spotlessly shining gold-bronze walkway curved away across the dark water towards the pipe organ towers. Forget defying gravity, how was everything kept so clean?

Jane giggled to herself that this was her first really coherent question. She'd been living in the desert too long, she'd had sand in too many places.

"It's a little ostentatious," she quipped.

"Impertinent mortal."

She could tell his heart wasn't in sparring with her right now, so she tried to let a little of her overwhelming enchantment show without losing her shit. "It's incredible. You guys have telescopes, right? I need an optical telescope, a spectroscope, and-"

"We shall see what havoc you can wreak. There is antique observational equipment in the palace scriptorium which you might use without great difficulty. Entry shouldn't be difficult." He bent low to allow her to slide off his back, catching her hand to help her down.

Jane stretched out her stiff muscles, sore as hell both from hanging on for dear life and clenching her whole body in terror. "Antiques?"

"I played with them as a child. You would find little you recognise in the observatory. I am only storing up treasures for you, Jane, I will deny you nothing."

That gave her a pang, but he started striding along the walkway and she had to jog to keep up.

"Obviously, they know we are here," he said, too quickly, "your bridge is not a subtle thing. But Odin would have known regardless and we can play quite a game of evasion if needs must."

"Loki," she said, uneasily, remembering how reckless this whole thing was, "I know I was all devil-may-care, but this is going to be all right, right? You didn't just let me carry you off on a-"

"You seemed so confident on Midgard."

"I wasn't really that confident, I'm just, like, super problematically stubborn and impulsive. And I can't help but believe-"

He froze so abruptly that she slammed into his back and knocked the breath out of her lungs. His arm came around her as he reached back and grabbed for her shoulder, herding her in close, his fingers digging into the fleshy spot above her scapula.
"No," he whispered, hardly audible, talking to himself rather than her. "I was wrong, I was wrong to come here and think I could- I can't see her, but I can't..."

Jane followed his gaze, the very slightly outstretched fingers of his free hand, reaching unconsciously for what he saw. There was a woman approaching along the metal path, her walk brisk but stately, and her progress the measured promenade of someone who knows they are being observed. Shadowed by a good half dozen armoured guards on each of her flanks, she affected a confident, cultured indifference to their presence. She was tall and fair, dark blonde hair piled in an elaborate wreath around her head before pouring down her back in immaculate ringlets set off against the warm bronze of her robe and the glitter of gold embroidery. Some kind of precious gem twinkled from her sleeves with every movement, and Jane could see the edges of an elaborate design embedded in the robe's train.

Jane did not need to be told that this was his mother.

She patted his hand on her shoulder, trying to be reassuring. "Well, it's too late now."

"I shouldn't have come here," he said miserably, his grip going slack and his arm falling away. "Naïve and covetous. I'll never learn."

Looking up at his face, Jane saw only the wanness of dread. "You do want to see her, you always-"

"Of course I wish to see her," he hissed, "I don't wish her to see me."

Oh. A tangle of pain seemed to pull down her throat and through her chest, snagging on her ribs and settling heavily in her gut. Oh. There was nothing she could say.

They stood motionless in an excruciating silence as the Queen and her entourage gradually approached. Jane felt confident that no one was going to have to remind her again that she was dealing with royalty, because she never could have imagined someone so obviously raised from birth to play exactly this role. The proud, upright way she held her head as she walked was precisely familiar, and the solemn magisterial expression was one Jane had seen often on the man beside her.

The Queen's face was pale and very slightly pinched beneath its veneer of noble serenity, her eyes a little too bright in the starlight. She raised her hand, the gesture as delicate as a ballerina's, and the procession stopped.

"All of you, leave us. Captain, fetch His Highness two fur cloaks and bring the horses," her voice was very soft, quavering minutely, but it carried easily. She waited for the soldiers to obey, not watching them as they bowed with their hands over their hearts and turned to go. Her gaze lifted, filling with the sight of Loki, not dead after all; she hesitated for an instant and then said, "My son."

Loki made a tiny noise in his throat which set Jane's fingers twitching in sympathetic anxiety, but his words in reply were icily censorious, "You mistake me greatly in your address, Madame. I am neither a prince, nor you son."

Jane nearly choked on her breath in dismay and frantically tried to decide how much worse it would make things if she were to stick her oar in. She had no idea what she was doing and it felt wrong to interfere, but so did standing idly by.

"Is that so?" the Queen whispered. "It must be that I dreamt I nursed a second babe at my breast, and held him to my heart while he slept, and guided his first step, and taught him there was magic. It must have been another woman who fretted over your childhood fevers and mended your hurts and gave you sweets. No boy mastered his first charm and embraced me and swore an oath to become the
greatest sorcerer in the Nine Realms. It was not I who wept until all the pools and depths of Asgard ran dry when my child fell into an abyss between stars torn asunder."

He said nothing. His shoulders trembled with tension.

The Queen's face was bone white, strain twisting at her features, her blue eyes blurred by a flood of welling tears. "Even if you would deny your family, cast yourself off from us forever and cleave instead to such a thin binding as your blood, there too you are the son of a king." Her chin came up, her dignity a sword she wielded, her emotion a buckler. "So I have called you rightly, Loki, Odin's son. You are twice a prince, in your body by your birth and in spirit and character by your family; you are still the child I raised."

Loki faced her, a muscle jumping in his cheek and his breathing ragged, but his posture as straight and unflinching as ever. He was trying so hard, Jane knew, so hard to keep aloof from this tortuous confrontation, to pretend he felt only anger and disdain. He couldn't begin to manage it. He shook his head, but didn't answer her.

"You can deny my womb, but you cannot deny I am your mother," her voice wobbled on the last word. "I once lifted you up when you were helpless, and I would pay a great price to have strength enough to do so again."

Loki laughed, sharply and bitterly, pointedly ignoring the tears his forced grin spilled down his cheeks. "Would you?"

Appalled, though not surprised or angry, the Queen stepped back. Her eyes flicked to Jane, a cloud passing in her expression.

"Forgive me! How rude. What poor hospitality," Loki sang, catching the look and suddenly lifting Jane's hand in mock cheerfulness, edging towards mania. "Jane, you are here privileged to come into the presence of Frigga Fjörgyndottir, Queen of Asgard. Mother, if I may present Doctor Jane Foster of Midgard. Doctor is a human title of merit and learning. Jane has no family, but she is terribly accomplished."

Frigga's head turned towards her and in a moment of Platonic awkwardness, Jane found herself dropping history's most clumsy curtsey and babbling, "Um, hi, Your- um- Majesty? Sorry about… um."

"Mother," Loki's voice throbbed, suddenly low in his chest, hoarse with stress, "please do explain to Doctor Foster our friendly way of life. The esteem in which you hold the fine people who birthed me into the world. The people we were given such cause to love, the temperance which we were so industriously taught in the face of political disagreement with the Elder Race. Tell her."

But Frigga was mute, her hand covering her mouth as she pressed her lips together, as if to hold in an outburst.

"Loki," Jane winced at how pragmatic she was about to sound in the midst of this very personal meltdown, "this isn't exactly the most productive way to-"

"You said you never wanted me to feel different! But how could you- you- not know that I always did? How could you ship me off for years and tell me lies and never lift a finger to help me make sense of...! Where was your compassion, your regret for cold black blood when our very nursery songs sang the joy of spilling it? Why didn't you tell me?"

Frigga shook her head, her words cautious and tender, "You know why. I could not. Your father
believed-

"My father! He knew Odin's measure very well, my father. He saw very clearly from his crumbling throne in his ruined Realm. Why didn't you teach me that a giant could be… wise..." Loki trailed off, stricken by his own train of thought.

The Queen's fair cheeks burned with flush and Jane hoped it was shame. If she was reading between the lines right on all of this history, she sure hoped it was shame.

"Loki," Frigga pleaded, "be patient with us."

"Patient!" he was so incredulous his shout broke over the second syllable. "How long have I lived? How long have I waited and tried to understand? How many years did I ask you why the others were not as I was, why their fate seemed written so differently to mine? Why should I be patient, be pitiful any more- why should I!"

"For the same reason that we have been patient and pitiful. For the same reason Thor was not banished without hope of return."

He sneered, disgusted at the mention of his brother's name. "Because he would be forgiven anything, because he is the favoured and anointed heir."

"For love of you. For both of you."

Loki bowed his head, his eyes on his shoes. "I would once have said that lies do not become you, Mother… how badly I misjudged."

Coming forward with her hands lifted in supplication, the Queen shook her head. "No words can wound me further. I mourned you."

She reached up to cup his face in her palms, brushing his hair back with her fingers as she gave him a watery smile. He stood frozen, staring at her with tremendous misgiving.

"I am punished all my mistakes. There can be no hurt as grave and festering as a child so at war with himself," she paused and visibly gathered her strength to go on, "that he would forfeit the battle."

Loki flinched, his eyes flitting around, looking anywhere but at her, then snapping back to her face as they widened in what might have been guilt. "Thor told you…?"

She stretched up to embrace him, folding her arms around his shoulders and spreading her hand over the back of his head to pull it down to rest against her throat. The sight of her slightly worn gold slippers peeking out from beneath the hem of her dress, one sliding a little from the curve of her heel as she arched her foot to stand on her toes, made Jane want to turn away.

"Your brother lied, but I am his mother, too. It was written in his eyes. And I knew."

Loki's hand very slowly drifted to the middle of her back, hovering between her shoulder blades for a long moment before lightly touching down. His stiff posture still did not relax. "I would not have had you suffer."

Frigga's hold on him only tightened, forcing him to bend another fraction, pulling him nearer, her tone as hard as iron, an old fury simmering beneath the sorrow, "Your death could never spare me pain."

"I don't understand," he murmured into her hair, sounding weary and shocked.
She pulled away to look at him, her face creased with worry. "I am sorry, Loki. I am so sorry."

Apprehension came back into his expression, a page turning and his brain firing up. "Will there be a trial? For treason? For murder?"

"No, no, no, no," Jane broke in, sounding to herself like a skipping CD. She had been giving them space for their emotional stuff, but this was too much and everything was so huge. This huge sky and these huge people with their titanic dramas, humanoid tidal waves crashing through an undefended universe, sweeping smaller creatures along in their wake. And she was feeling very small. "We're not staying for that party, we're not going down- you can't go to- to- the dungeon or whatever. You are coming back with me. You're my ride home, you promised. You promised me."

The Queen glanced at her shrewdly and there were oceans of experience in those eyes, there was a knowing look of such depth and breadth that Jane felt stripped to a kind of spiritual nakedness, the raw core of her being exposed. Was that magic? Some kind of technology they called magic? But there was no hum, no subtle glow, no smell of ozone, no sense of disturbance in the air. That wasn't it. This was something simpler and more terrible, she could sense it, her industrious mind groping towards an idea she wasn't certain she wanted to reach. She was suddenly intimidated by the Queen in a brand new way unlike anything she'd ever felt, and she didn't want to think about it at all.

"I have been most eager to meet you, Jane Foster of Midgard, who has effected such a profound impact upon my sons." Frigga was warm and gracious in spite of everything, her gentle manner dispelling some of the aura of otherness which had frightened Jane. "You cast before you a long shadow."

Wrong-footed by the- pretty obvious in hindsight- revelation that this discreetly imposing woman had been hearing about her and forming Impressions, Jane didn't really know what to say to that. "I, uh, I didn't actually do much. I was just curious."

Loki snorted.

Frigga's admonishing glance had the tiniest shade of a smile. "Indeed. Thor tells me you are an astronomer."

She squinted, holding out her hand and tipping it back and forth ambivalently. "Sort of?"

"Welcome to Asgard, Doctor Astronomer. There is much we must say."
He swung up into the saddle, letting his cloak fall open as he reached down for Jane's forearm to pull her up in front of him. Her wet hair was plastered to her skull and she shivered even in the Asgardian tunic Frigga had provided for her, looking uncannily like a half-drowned kitten. He tucked her close against him and wrapped the fur-lined cloak around them both.

"Thanks," Jane muttered through chattering teeth, pressing herself towards him as if to burrow into his body. The cold had seemed to encompass her suddenly as they waited for their escort to return and he wondered at the human ability to shut out the suffering of their mortal form so long as the mind was occupied. Jane's ability, at any rate.

"Enough?" he asked, concerned by her pallor. Even her fragile human nature was surely hardier than to succumb to lasting damage from a little cold water?

Jane saluted him sarcastically, some of her humour apparently returning as she leached warmth from his skin. Her icy little fingers found the space between his buttonholes and slipped inside his shirt while she glared up at him, daring him to protest the liberty. He would have if her touch were not so chill.

"Sure, I'm awesome," she said, only a trifle peevishly. "Shipshape and Bristol fashion. Just as soon as the feeling comes back." She pulled the fur over her head, disappearing into a cocoon of pelts and fabric.

He smiled to himself, her queer human expression seeming oddly apt. Feeling coming back.

He turned his head to look at his mother as the einherjar captain politely handed her up onto her mount, side-saddled to accommodate her court dress. Frigga settled herself and trotted up beside him, reading his face with her customary ease.

"I've walked these paths nearly without ceasing since Thor's return. I hoped."

Walking on her own feet so she would not miss any subtle disturbances of magic worked or otherworldly doors opened. So he would not slip through and meet someone else first upon arrival. He had underestimated his mother in failing to anticipate her stubbornness, but he did not hold himself accountable, how could he have known she would care to be stubborn on such a course? For what purpose? It occurred to him she was likely accompanied because Odin had forbidden her to make such rounds unguarded.

"Does Father know why you walk?"

She didn't answer immediately, but looked away.

Loki's heart turned over, a phantom sensation of vast claws clutching at his ribs so it seemed difficult to draw breath. He steadied himself, counting the stars above him and the strides of his horse. The heat which was still in his blood had shocked him, his own lack of control in the face of his mother standing before him- there in the flesh where he had once been quite certain of never seeing her again- almost completely unexpected.

He had thought his anger run out, at last boiled dry and leaving only dessicated ashes of bitterness where passion and madness had been, but in that self-assessment he was much mistaken. He saw her wilted disappointment and the dark thing had him again within its grip, his lips spitting the first poison he could reach for before he had consciously decided to speak.
"Your Father knows everything," she finally said. "He must know this."

The most terrible thing- far more terrible than being clapped in irons and thrown in the dungeons never to be thought of again- was how absolutely nothing had changed.

He had torn himself limb from limb, he'd thrashed and wailed and shamed himself past all shred of recognition- he had broken himself in the useless attempt to reforge his bones, reform his wretchedness into a shape they could accept. Every horror and dishonour and betrayal had been permitted in pursuit of this goal, until he was a stranger to himself, and it had changed nothing. His significance was as small as ever.

He pretended to lean forward to adjust the halter, to untangle his already perfect reins, so he could nose through the bulk of cloth which was Jane and find the scent of her hair. It was faint, she smelled of seawater more than her ordinary mortal perfumes, but she was warm and snoring softly and terribly familiar. He wished he could learn her way. To care and not to care, to be faithful to the truth with upright courage. He suspected that much of her strength of character lay in her ability to be forthright within her own mind; he was certain that failure in this was a source of the weakness in his.

"It will bring your brother peace to see her well," Frigga said, an undertone to her voice it pleased him to ignore.

"And the subject turns to Thor again, as it inevitably must." As it had throughout his life, as it had even in the midst of his most singular, most devastating crisis. For all their fine words, they could not pretend to concern themselves with his petty creature fears for even the span of a few moments longer than decency demanded. Why must everyone he encountered lie to him? It couldn't be a judgement on him- how else had he learnt his own contrivances if not at home?- it must be his fate. It must be his secret repulsive nature drawing out the disease in all who ventured close.

Frigga looked weary, even frail, and his thoughts melted away before a rush of panic. If she should fall into a swoon because of him and his needling provocations...

"He was most agitated as to her welfare when he arrived," she said, her patience infinite. "I thought to broach the subject gently."

What had happened on Midgard, that was what she wanted to know, and she would allow him the opportunity to give his account in private before the accusations began to fly. There wasn't room in his heart to trust that this was all of her motive when the jab seemed so sharp.

"I have enchanted no one," he muttered.

"Of course not, don't be childish," she admonished. His mother knew better than to believe such nursery hogswallop, she seemed offended he would imply otherwise. "But why have you brought a mortal here? Loki, please do confide in me a little, as you used to. Why did you not… Why would you permit me to think you dead?"

Diplomacy. He recognised its sickly taste in an appeal to past confidence. She was the only one who would bother to be delicate with him. "Will I be arrested when we reach the palace?"

"No." Her voice was reedy, brittle. He had wounded her pride.

"No?"

"You are our son, Loki," she said again, the lie stinging in his ears.
"Oh, I see. The people do not know the truth. What an embarrassment it would be, how fatal to the All-father's legacy if he were known to have nursed a viper in his bosom. Why did he do it? What were his true plans for me? What did he say to convince you not to dash my skull against the stones when he presented you with an infant monster?"

Frigga of the soft heart looked down at the reins in her hands, the only sounds the horses' hooves clacking softly as they walked and the distant crash of the falls. Loki's own heart seemed to beat too quickly, to stutter and painfully skip.

"He had to tell me what you were. You were already changed. But then I could feel it for myself, the winter in the heart of you had not yet faded completely."

Loki shuddered, his stomach churning. He wanted to rush on away from her words, to cover her mouth and silence the damning truth.

"Your eyes were so wide, so clear. I'd never seen such knowing in the eyes of a child. I would not have you in my arms at first, but that gaze…" She touched each of her cheeks in turn, as if she were feverish, pushing back some emotion. "Your father conjured ice to soothe your throat. You'd cried so desperately before he found you that you could hardly make a further sound. And… it pierced my heart. You whimpered and took suck from an icicle and it wounded me for all of my days. You were a baby. Just a baby."

He felt in danger of cracking all his teeth from clenching his jaws, the bones aching under the pressure, even his equilibrium suspect. If he fell from the saddle, it would be the final indignity.

"A baby," he repeated.

She waited, holding the edge of her sleeve below her watery eyes, the strain to keep composure twisting her mouth.

Ancestors preserve him in the face of this. "You cannot have believed that. If I were just a baby, Mother, then my kin were men. If that is even one fraction true, that I am anything but- and if that is so, how could… how could you teach us…?"

Frigga was helpless, she saw it very clearly, she could make no more sense of this than he had. She was in possession of no answer which would render any of his life into something he could fathom, she could bring him no peace. It was cruelty to press her for what she could not give.

"What were his plans?" he asked again.

"At first he hoped you might succeed Laufey and bring the peace of Asgard to Jotunheim."

Loki swallowed bile and hated that he'd guessed this from the beginning, hated that his own mind worked so much in kind with Odin's. "How could he expect to put me on a throne he had drenched with blood, how could he expect me to rule a land and a people I thought of as waste and devils? How could he imagine ever telling me what I was after a childhood in which-"

"Oh, my son," Frigga moaned, "we hadn't thought of those plans in so long, it seemed they never existed. You became only our second child, a helpmate and companion for your brother, we began to see your future as one here among us, in this life. I fell to your charms before you took your first steps, I could not bear to part with you."

"You bore it when you banished me to Álfheimr when I was hardly grown out of swaddling clothes. You bore it when I begged to stay and you dismissed me. You bore it well enough to see nothing of me for years."
She was aghast. "Begged! Loki, you didn't-"

"I thought you would protect me," he whispered, instantly ashamed to have said it. The tattered remnants of his pride bristled with the impulse to lash out, but he was too tired to truly care. He wanted this prolonged, torturous emotion to be extinguished. "Forgive me. These things no longer matter, and I stray from the point. Odin cannot hope to have use of me now- nor can anyone. I wanted to spare you, Mother. I have always wished to spare you, and it seemed I was myself the thing I most needed to spare you from."

His mother sobbed and the guilt cut through his weary lethargy with brutal sharpness. He bit his cheek until it bled.

"Please…" he said. Perhaps she had truly believed, perhaps Odin allowed her to believe he had become nothing more than a child. He wanted to think so, but the norns so seldom gave him the things he wanted and Frigga was not naive.

She made an aborted reach for him, abandoning the gesture when he did not reciprocate to span the distance. "I wanted for you every advantage, to give you anything you needed. I did not think I alone could provide what your education did not."

He burned with humiliation, wishing fervently that he had governed his tongue. "It doesn't matter."

"It does. It does matter, tell me."

_Nothing matters._ "It did me little service to become even more a stranger in my home than I already was."

She stared at him, looking struck and chastened, as if a long war within her heart was now over. "Your father counselled against it, but I convinced him to allow a long boarding. I convinced him Thor would ensure a place was kept for you upon your return."

He wondered whether Odin had wanted him close at hand for reasons of his own which Frigga did not know, or if he simply feared losing direct control of his creature's education, his upbringing the key to shaping a useful tool. Of course he knew the effect it might have, his father had always understood him more readily than anyone else.

"I thought it was the right course for both of you, so you might complement. I fear I was shortsighted."

He brushed this aside, suddenly seeing only absurdity in his battering of supposed grievances, meaningless hurts stored up from the past. "Would it have made any difference? Would anything? My covetous grip has only injured those I clutch to me… it is precisely this from which I would spare you."

"My darling child, your love is not a burden. It is meet to care for us, to long to make us proud. That was not the crime."

Loki yanked the reins, pulling his horse up short, and shut his eyes tight. The beast huffed in protest and pawed the ground, tonguing his bit.

Frigga's hand touched his thigh and he looked down to see her standing at the horse's flank, watching him with worried eyes.

"Mother," he said painfully, searching for the words he wanted, "why torment me? Why coddle me and reprove me, always both? I cannot be both the child and the monster. I cannot learn both wisdom
and cunning at my father's feet and understand the difference. I betrayed you because I love you. Lies are inseparable from my nature, that is how your pity wrought me. If that pity was not a crime itself, then I have stained your mercy with blood."

Her pale white fingers clutched at him, he didn't dare to look on her face.

"A better man than I would be grateful to Thor. Even he, with all his blindness and all his cradle thoughts and all his selfishness, he would give his cherished life to prevent the catastrophes my love would wreak. My most selfless impulse is expressed all in vanity, and I scatter wounds like carrion crows- and in this meanness I spoke of the good of Asgard, as if the commonweal were my concern. I slithered twice towards a cowardly slaughter and only Thor's pigheadedness saved me from it, borrowed luck from his favoured stars. If it is your wish to see the crack in my character made whole as his was, the facts will ever be otherwise."

"Birth didn't teach him better," she said softly, an edge of hardness in her voice which had been absent. "We, his parents, did not teach him better, we failed him as we failed you- I had no stomach for discipline and your father... It was his time on Midgard which changed your brother's heart, Loki, not the stars under which he was born. I think you know something more than I about how and why."

The bundle in front of him was very still, he realised. Too still and quiet to be obliviously asleep.

"Then he told you of my visit?" he asked baldly. From Jane, no more secrets were hid, and games of discretion had lost their appeal.

Frigga's eyes dropped and he knew she could not conceal her disappointment in him.

"Yes, of course he did. He would have wanted to discover if there was any truth to what I'd said."

"It was you who reached him in the end. I am sorry I could not see more my sons more clearly."

Loki grit his teeth. "Don't forgive me, Mother, not for the sake of that. I didn't do it to help him."

"Forgiveness is not earned, my son. It is a gift. For my part, I had already forgiven you whatever was in my power to forgive. I might ask that you try also to forgive me, but… if you cannot..."

He gnawed on his lip, fighting the urge to weep. "I want no further pity."

"I have none." His mother's expression was profoundly sad and he hated that he had seen it. 

_Damn it._ He ignored the tear which escaped him and swallowed thickly. He must push on with the only mission he had left. "On the subject of Midgard, Jane Foster must be provided for. I have offered her hospitality and safe passage. She will receive it. Whatever is necessary."

Frigga pursed her lips and shook her head, disapproving of him and his evasion. "A mortal in the house of Odin. I have lived to witness exceptional times. Of course, she will be accommodated with every dignity as the guest of an Odinson. For your sake and for Thor's."

"And where are you taking me, if not..."

"Where you must go, Loki. To see your father."
Jane drifted in and out, too exhausted to hang on against the gentle sway of the horse's gait and the warmth of shared body heat lulling her to sleep, even as she wanted desperately to listen. Mother and son spoke in low voices until Loki suddenly pulled up short, and Jane held her breath while he confessed that he felt himself beyond help or hope.

She thought he was grateful to his brother, admitting it by denying it. Jane was grateful, anyway.

They went on talking, Frigga insisting they must go directly into Odin's presence while Loki argued for the need to pause and make themselves presentable. She smiled a little to herself as Loki wove a wide circle of reasonable premises which then narrowed and narrowed until he'd trapped his mother into agreeing that Jane needed to be warmed up properly and carefully for the sake of her fragile mortal health. Then he struck for the jugular.

"Allow me my own time to prepare. I should like the chance to meet my fate with dignity."

Jane wished she could see Frigga's reaction to this quiet pronouncement; the silence was deafening.

She must have dozed off again, because the next thing she knew she was being jostled as Loki shifted her weight into his arms, turning her head so he could whisper in her ear.

"Wake, Jane Foster. Look."

Her fuzzy head registered the words, but she didn't come to full consciousness until he pushed the cloak away from her face and a gust of cold air went right down her neck. Blinking and wriggling, she shook off her lethargy. Loki was looking at her eagerly, his face shadowed by the deep hood of his cloak, now pulled low over his brow. He grinned, gathering her close, and she clutched at his lapels in terror as he stood up in the stirrups and nudged her chin with his.

"Look."

She did, developing instant vertigo as she stared up at the endless grandeur of the pipe organ building, looming above them like a smooth, gold mountain. They were on a curve of the path, still not quite level with the central structure, but at its feet she could see a huge courtyard tiled with blinding white stone and a bridge the size of a freeway leading into it. The broad expanse of the bridge was flanked on either side by colossal statues of warrior figures standing inside floating arches which looked to weigh hundreds of thousands of tonnes. The axe the nearest titan was holding was probably the size of a yacht. Jane felt microscopic.

The gold surfaces shone even brighter now that they were close, the starlight amplified by the reflection giving the buildings a dim halo, and birds circling the towers were like specks against the pristine walls.

"The palace," Loki said, his breath tickling her cheek. "When we were boys, we climbed that tower—just there. At the top, we couldn't get inside and couldn't get down again. It took Father's ravens two
days to find us."

She stared at him, appalled, and he laughed.

"Thor was boasting and I dared him to prove himself. Of course, I had meant for him to go alone, but somehow..."

"And I thought I was a handful as a kid."

They made the rest of the trip at a slow walk in single file, Loki keeping his face obscured in the folds of his hood. The path wound its way down to a more modest side entrance of the palace, passing through gardens and scrubby woods with low shrubs and more kinds of flowering moss than Jane could ever have imagined existing. She tried to take everything in, but it blurred into a general impression of scale and colour in spite of her efforts to observe specifics.

Eventually they made their way inside an enormous antechamber in the left wing of towers, where Loki tucked her into one arm and slid out of the saddle with practised nonchalance, handing his reins to a silent guard. He set her down and she stretched as she turned a circle to take in the room. It echoed like a cave, the footfalls of the horses being lead away seeming to come from everywhere, the smooth walls appearing to curve upwards forever as their shine reflected firelight from vast braziers standing at the sides of the room and hanging from the distant ceiling.

"My mother will take you to one of her lady's chambers. You will stay at her side, won't you, Mother? I can leave my guest in your care?" There was a strident undertone to his veneer of pleasantry and Jane knew he was pressing hard to extract a promise. She didn't know how afraid to be, how to object to splitting up in front of all these people.

"Of course, my son. You have my word she will want for nothing. I will not leave her unattended for even a moment."

"Very well, then," he said quickly, suddenly seeming hurried. He bowed over his mother's hand, and then over Jane's, surprising her with a dry kiss on her knuckles. "Until our next meeting, Jane Foster."

Frigga frowned after him, her brow knit with worry. Jane watched him walking away, weaving rapidly between guards and grooms and others working various tasks she didn't understand. She didn't like that goodbye one bit, she didn't like him slipping off into a crowd by himself.

Turning, she found Frigga studying her with a shrewd look. "I must beg your pardon, Doctor Jane, for keeping you from your rest. I'm sure you are very weary. Travelling by bifrost takes some acclimatisation."

"Umm, yeah," Jane said stupidly, not knowing how to deal with being left alone with a queen. "I, uh, I mean sure. It's important, right? Whatever you need. Um, Your Majesty."

Frigga smiled indulgently. "Very well. Come this way."

"So, uh, you guys discovered and built the first bifrost?"

Travelling through the prodigious corridors at a good clip (Jane had to do a pretty ungraceful trot to keep up with Frigga's stately, gliding walk), she had the increasing sensation she now understood how it felt to be a white rat set loose in some experimental labyrinth of truly heroic dimensions. Gaping openly at everything around her, she tried to memorise what she was seeing and also listen as Frigga went into the history of Asgard.
"But how does it function if-"

"This way, Doctor Jane."

The Queen waved her through several sets of alternating small and large doorways, each recessed in apparently purely decorative rooms, each with tear-drop shaped arches formed from carved lattices which looked like thousands of tiny tree branches wound together in fractal patterns. Finally opening into the main room, lit again by braziers, there was a set of low terraces, cut in geometric patterns and framing a huge diamond shaped pool full of steaming, milky white water and covered in some kind of flower petals. All around it were narrow, claw-footed benches draped with diaphanous fabrics and furs.

Three women wrapped in muslin toga-type things appeared from another recessed door, one with a ewer, one with an arm full of sea sponges, and one with a tray of delicate glass bottles holding differently coloured oily substances.

Jane opened her mouth to protest.

Later, scrubbed within an inch of her life and wrapped in her own toga thing, she was being shown a bunch of hopelessly fancy robes she wanted nothing to do with. Two of the servants were winding her hair up into a wreath of braids around the crown of her head and sticking it full of gold bobbins with fragile gold flowers on the ends. The petals were so delicate, they moved if you breathed on them.

The third servant held up what looked to Jane like thirty yards of forest green fabric, woven into itself and inlaid with gold embellishments. "Prince Loki has instructed that you be offered his colours, Doctor Jane," she said quietly, brushing the back of her hand over the robes in presentation.

Jane sought out Frigga with panicky eyes. "What does that mean?"

Standing at the edge of a lattice which shielded the room from an outside balcony, Frigga glanced away from the view. "If you wear them, it means you are a member of his household and under his protection. You become a subject through his patronage and he takes responsibility for your actions before the throne of Asgard."

Jane stared at the green robes. Surely that was kind of a good sign? He couldn't think his situation was so dire if he was going to hitch her wagon to his identity like that. But maybe she was missing something.

"It was that garden- you see the white colonnades?" Frigga pointed down the rows of terraces to a perfectly manicured series of walks with rows of columns and short trees surrounded by hedges which hugged the curve of the next tower over. "It was that garden where I first beheld him. The leaves were fresh, everything was new and fragrant. My husband chose Loki's colours as a token of the hopes he cherished in that garden. Hope in a fresh dawn and something newly growing."

Jane thought of what she had overheard this same woman saying about not wanting a Jotun baby in her arms and wondered. "He told me something once about the acacia being in bloom. That you told him, I mean. He said you told him about when he was born..." she trailed off, leaving the implication that obviously this wasn't quite true.

Frigga's eyes widened in surprise. "I did not imagine he would remember such a thing. Acacia are a winter blossom. I..."

"I get it." Hell of an inside joke. "What is he so worried about? Why does he want me protected?"
"To my knowledge, no mortal has ever worn the colours of an Asgardian prince under any circumstances." The Queen looked uncomfortable. "It is very rare for any such... the primitive races are not looked on as petitioners or subjects. They have no voice in these halls and cannot be expected to have one. We must be custodians of your world for exactly this reason."

Well, translating that from diplomatic to English and adding in the tactfully unstated parts she'd already heard bluntly enumerated while Loki was posturing for SHIELD, Jane reckoned what was really being said was that she was a backward savage and essentially an exotic zoo animal as far as the Asgardians were concerned. And Frigga, while acting like kindness itself and obviously sympathetic to Jane personally, didn't give off the vibe of being terribly opposed to that general assessment.

"He doesn't wish you to be taken as only a mortal," Frigga finally added with polite embarrassment. As if they were speaking of an indiscretion.

"I am, though. I am only a mortal." Jane paused. "This won't make stuff worse for him, will it?"

Frigga shook her head, a certain shrewdness showing around her mouth. "No. I should think it stands him very well."

Jane turned back to the robes. Yeah, it must look good to have compassion for the hapless primitives, right? Sticking up for the weaker animals? They were aliens, but their concept of nobility didn't seem as different as all that.

"Do you accept the colours, Doctor Jane?" the servant finally asked, her manner hesitant and apologetic.

"Yeah, totally. Why not. I mean yes."

As they were dressing her, she tried desperately to follow how the layers worked and to guess at what things might be made of, but it was hopeless. There was a white shift, a stretchy vest thing that looked like leather and felt more like spandex with some kind of reinforcing inside, thick brocade, and silky stuff which felt cool against her skin. The final layer involved gold metal hooked over her chest and side where the vest was underneath, overall giving the distinct impression of armour even though her legs were buried in acres of impractical skirts. Then a draped walking cloak covered her shoulders, her arms coming through long slits instead of sleeves.

"What rank is 'Doctor' in human society, Jane Foster?" Frigga asked, walking around her with a critical eye, checking that she was coiffed within an inch of her life.

"It's, um, well it kinda depends. Pretty high up sort of, I guess? I'm not a medical doctor, which I think is kind of higher, socially, but it means I earned a lot of educational recognition and I'm an expert in my field. I teach others and people consult me about astrophysics. Basically. Your Majesty."

"My sons hold you in great esteem. Not, I think, for this learning. I do not impugn it by saying so, I simply suggest I know my children too well to imagine they are so studious or respectful of mortal knowledge."

"Well, in Thor's case, maybe it's something else, but..."

"Loki may prize your intellect, but it is not that which he admires." The queen stepped close to her and dropped a pendant around her neck, its long chain hanging almost to her belly button. It was a small gold phial. "Break it if you ever have need. A simple charm, but useful. Consider it my thanks"
for what you have done for our family."

Jane sputtered, wanting to argue with literally everything she'd just said.

"You are ready now. Let us go."

............

Frigga walked her back through the maze of hallways and Jane found it even harder to keep up with the unfamiliar silk slippers she was wearing sliding off her heels every third step. Jogging and hopping, she pulled them back on.

"So what did Thor tell you about me, exactly?" she asked breathlessly.

"Not a great deal, you needn't fear a loose tongue. He considers that he owes you a debt, and he spoke of your exemplary conduct." She turned a corner sharply and waited for Jane to catch up so she could lower her voice. "Thor is not of many words, but no secrets are hid, Jane Foster, not from me. Have you chosen to take up arms for one side in the family disharmony? Have you..."

Stung and disappointed with how unsurprised she was, Jane shook her head. "Are you accusing me of plotting against Thor?" She deliberately left the co-conspirator who was obviously most concerned and would be primarily to blame if this were the case unspoken, preferring that it stay that way.

The barb struck and Frigga's face creased with dismay. "You must know it's impossible..."

"Mother!"

They both froze and swivelled as one to face Thor, who charged towards them from the other end of the corridor.

"Jane Foster," he saluted gravely, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder, "I would speak with you."

"I guess that's okay," Jane said uncertainly, sneaking a glance at Frigga. She was a tiny bit scared to leave the Queen's side after Loki's pointed insistence that his mother stay with her, sure he had a reason. "Your Majesty, would it be terrible and rude of me if I asked you to just wait right here while we talk in, um, that alcove thing over there?"

Frigga scrutinised them both, her long earrings swinging like pendulums as she turned her head to look between them. "Very well, Doctor Jane, if that is your wish. I have promised to attend you."

"I would ask..." Thor started to say in an imperious tone.

"Please," Jane interrupted, "I really don't want her to go."

Thor stopped short in surprise, staring at her for a long moment. He shook his head as if to clear it and herded her into the alcove. "Jane Foster, I must tell you that my brother came to visit me."

"You guys didn't fight again, did you, because I swear..."

"No, no, fear not, all is well. He had a plan, and there was a part for me in it. He said it was to be your choice. He said he had done what was necessary for you to have that choice."

Jane's heart leapt into her throat and she grabbed at Thor's cape where it attached to his collar. "What? What did he say? What's the choice?"
"Be at peace, Jane Foster, he has explained much."

God, if anything was going to make her way less peaceful it was hearing a line like that. Who knew what he had 'explained' to get back on speaking terms with Thor.

"I know you have longed for the chance to study our stars, to research magic and science on Asgard, and Loki hoped to give it to you, but now... I'm sorry." The sincerity of Thor's regret was all over his face, but it passed quickly. "I would have liked to show you my world. But if you cannot stay, there is another course. Loki told me of a sea cave near one of the outer islands where 'uncertainty is certain'- you know of what he speaks?"

"Yeah, I do, he means there's access to a good wormhole site." She put her hand to her chest, her pulse pounding against her palm. "What's the plan?"

"He gave me this to give to you." He passed her a haphazard bundle with an Asgardian cylinder, like those in their atom smasher, jury rigged to an adjusted digital watch with an old smart phone screen soldered to it. Loki's handwriting in china marker across the glass explained how to turn it on and not to do so without strapping it to her wrist. Jane felt a wave of cold dread coming up through her guts. "He said that you would understand its workings. There is enough power for us to return to Midgard."

"Us?" she repeated, stunned.

"My father is well, the realm is safe. If you would like my company, it is yours. I do not swear an oath lightly, Jane Foster, and I swore to come back for you. These haven't been the reunions I foresaw, I would make that right." He smiled gently and there was sweetness in his expression which broke her heart. "There is much still for me to learn, and I have had good teachers on Midgard."

"How would you get back? My bridge is toast and I can't... I can't..."

"You will start anew! And if need be, I will wait to return until the bifrost is repaired. By that time... it will be time to go. Although there is this." He held up what looked like a quartz sea stone, but which she guessed must be something else. "Loki stole it from the healing room. It could prolong your prime by as much as thirty years, perhaps more."

She tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. Loki had thought of all of this before they left earth. He'd built her a single-use wormhole maker out of lab junk before he'd even posed the question about bringing her here with only his magic to get her home. In case she said no? In case she couldn't trust him without insurance? Or had he planned exactly this moment right now, had he known all along they'd catch him with sentiment even if they could never catch him with force?

"Jane," Thor said tenderly, his knuckle tipping her chin up, "do not be burdened. Our lives are long and Asgard is eternal; she will be here always. I would give up more than time for your sake."

*I didn't do that much for you, I really didn't. Everyone is so grateful and all I can think is... "What about Loki?"

His hand slid down to a loose grasp at the base of her throat, the same affectionate touch which she'd seen him use on his brother, but the warmth of his skin didn't comfort her and his knowing sympathetic look was not one she wanted. "My brother is not a puzzle to be solved, or a challenge for you to overcome, Jane Foster. You cannot keep him contained in a notebook or a make sense of him through a telescope. Believe me, I have tried for a long time to untwist his brambles. The thorns are not for show."
She was so angry she wanted to barf and then cry. She shrugged his hand off her neck and stepped back. "Is that what he said? That I think he's a problem to solve?"

Thor's eyes were relentless in meeting hers, his gaze never dropping. "He said you deserved the chance to walk in the sun. He said he wanted to teach you about our home, to show you how he thinks with magic, but he is certain Father's judgement would not allow it even if he should allow a mortal into the far reaches of Asgard. He expects further punishment for bringing you here.

"He asked me, for the sake of who we once were to each other, to give you every choice in my power if he could not do as he promised. I have honoured that by offering the one thing I've learned is really mine to give."

The sick feeling wasn't passing. She stared at him and tried to figure out from his face where he thought they stood, what impression Loki had given him. No wonder Loki was so keen to make sure he'd be the one blamed for her being here, Thor needed to be free to act so he could do this.

"Well," she said, barely keeping a lid on her temper, "you forgot one. A choice."

He frowned in confusion.

"Where is Loki now?"

"He went to prepare to meet Father."

"Great, I've got time for the third option! Jane doesn't co-operate. Your Majesty, please take me to Odin!"
I really hoped to have this up last week, but this chapter DID NOT want to co-operate at all.

She rushed toward a set of giant double doors, nipping ahead of Frigga as the guards stationed on either side leapt to pull them open when they saw the Queen approaching. A rush of warm air washed over her as the intricately carved doors swung out of the way, and it felt bizarrely like walking into a vacuum chamber.

There was a depth of silence in the room which made her own heartbeat sound like an echo and she slowed instinctively to a cautious tip-toe as she crossed the threshold, quickly enfolded by sudden darkness when she left the bright, golden glow of the corridor. The only light came from a massive hearth to the right of the doorway, the fire smouldering low in its bed, and the huge, oblong pillars in the centre of the floor seemed to disappear into a thick blanket of shadow pressing down with oppressive heaviness from the high ceiling.

Subduing and ominous, the dark gave Jane a phantom impression of ringing with fraught tension. Like a distant klaxon, sensed more than heard.

It was another geometrically terraced room, the floor in different levels with a trapezoidal sitting area in its middle and steps at one corner up to a high dais set diagonal to the main body of the space. On the dais, there was a vast table with thick, scrolled legs, and a heavy chair draped in furs addressing the surface of the desk. Sitting there was a man, hardly more than a dark shape in the gloom to her unadjusted eyes, but his presence commanded instant attention. He seemed to draw all the energy in the room towards himself, dominating and pervasive, yet he slumped slightly against the broad armrest at his side, as if he was too weary to straighten his back.

Finally, she caught sight of Loki. Dressed in a relatively simple high-collared black tunic and with his damp black hair combed back over his shoulders, he seemed a part of the velvety shadows, only the deathly pale skin of his face and hands standing out. He was kneeling on the steps, his head bent very low and his expression completely concealed from her.

The silence went on interminably, even the crackling of the fire muffled, and Jane felt suffocated by the weight of it. Something had already been said, something so ponderous and terrible that it had frozen this disquieting tableau in place.

The figure on the dais stirred and she saw glints of gold embroidery in his robe and the flash of shine on an ornament on his chest which suggested the shape of a breastplate, she saw that his long hair and beard were almost pure white; she couldn't doubt his identity for a moment. Lifting his hands to the arms of his chair, Odin pushed himself slowly to his feet and the dense atmosphere seemed to gather around him, the darkness thickening in the far reaches of the room and the air seeming to thin where Jane was standing.

The ruddy, flickering light gathered in the crags of his aged face, deep shadow weighing heavily
beneath his one, tired eye, the glow on his skin like a sheen of sickness.

Stepping forward, hesitantly, as if it pained him, Odin made his way to the edge of the dais, looming hugely over the supplicant who knelt before him. Close enough to touch. He thrust his hand out over Loki's bowed head, fingers spread to the width of his skull, and it hovered there. Trembling.

Jane looked down at herself, then behind her around the room, ready to grab anything she could use as a shield and charge the hell in. Could it really be this was a magical execution? She couldn't believe that was happening, she just couldn't- the very thought was ridiculous- but the look of struggle on the old man's face made her heart clench and her guts churn. *You don't know what they're capable of, Jane.*

Frigga appeared from nowhere like a striking snake, her hand latching around Jane's wrist in a bruising grip. "Wait," she whispered.

Odin exhaled in a sudden rush and his hand dropped heavily onto the crown of Loki's head, fingertips twisting in his hair.

"Loki," Odin gasped, his voice thick and halting, "how often would you have me mourn you, boy? How many funeral ships will satisfy you vanity?"

Jane made a tiny choking noise in the back of her throat, relief and anger colliding. No one heard.

"Always the faithful scholar. You have learnt so perfectly all that I most did not wish to teach you, and so imperfectly all that which I did. Stubborn and precocious to a fault. Entirely too clever."

He leaned down into his hold, making it just a bit less distant and awkward. Loki's head bent even lower, his shoulders hunching, as if the weight of that touch were more than he could bear.

"You are your father's son."

"My...?" Loki's voice was very small, drifting away uncertainly.

"A wise king never seeks out war," Odin said deliberately, a ponderous silence between adverb and verb. "A patient warrior hardly need fight. A brave man has no call to lie. Justice is delivered without anger. Why did neither of you listen? Why does my most favoured audience heed me least?"

"Laufey's son," Loki said slowly, as if he were only just catching up to Odin's earlier words, protesting them as they sank in.

Odin withdrew and fell abruptly into his chair again, leaning against its high back as if to gather strength. He shut his eye in a grimace, pain and frustration cut deeply into the lines of his face. "I had such confidence in your level head, your pragmatism. So much faith that you, at least, took some of your lessons to heart. Once again, I am not the judge of mettle which I thought."

Jane ignored the restraining hands on her and stumbled forward a step even as Frigga tried to haul her arm back. "Okay, hi, I have a question!"

Loki froze, not even breathing. "Jane?"

"Sorry to butt in and everything, Your Majesty, but-"

Odin stared at her, absolutely shocked, holding the arms of his chair in a death grip as if that were the only thing keeping him in place. He turned to his wife, "What is this? How comes a-"
"Hey!" Jane objected, stung in a deep and primal way she hadn't felt for years, "I'm a who, not a what. I know I'm pretty out of order and barging in and everything, but I'm not a what. My name is Jane Foster, and I'm..."

"The woman? Thor's mortal?" The singular gaze drifted over her, assessing her like a soldier at parade.

"Okay, that's a whole other- back up, that's a whole thing there."

"Yes, she is the one," Frigga answered calmly, ignoring her. "It seems she has sheltered Loki also while he exiled himself on Midgard."

"Jane, what are you doing here?" It was Loki who managed to finish the question. He sounded strained.

And she couldn't handle it any more, she couldn't deal with the fact that he had given up, that he'd made sure to account for her on his way to his personal gallows, to press her into Thor's arms thinking that might be what she wanted, that it had to be what she deserved. To walk in the sun. And she understood his secret codes very clearly, that he still thought of himself as the shadow over not just his family's life, but hers as well. He'd come to this room, to his weary father the king, and he'd offered himself up to death fully expecting no better mercy than swiftness. Expecting to find himself alone in the dock.

"I'm here because you obviously need me," she blurted out, skipping over the other reasons she could not even consider leaving and hanging on to her temper by a thread. She turned back to Odin, searching his weathered face for the truth, trying to look between the legends she'd gathered from his awe-struck sons. "I'm here to learn about Asgard, that's why we came, isn't it? I want to know my benevolent overlords."

He bristled, but his eye glinted with cunning and she didn't know if she was provoking rage or amusement or just cold interest. "Your race has been content to forget us for a generation, mortal woman, to forget gratitude and fealty. And you claim a right to speak before the Throne Eternal?"

She held up her arms to make her robes flare out around her. "I got this fancy outfit here and I'm told that makes me a subject. I mean, unless..." she let it trail off, everyone knowing what she was driving at. Unless that particular patronage doesn't matter because he's right about you and always has been.

Odin gave her that exact same incredulous little not-smile that Loki did when she called him an idiot or took too many liberties or otherwise really offended him. He sighed. "Ancestors preserve me from the rashness of children."

Suddenly Loki was dragging himself half upright, his feet still staggered on different steps and one hand on the edge of the dais, his fingers bone white against the dull gold. "How is it," he demanded, the words harsh and rasping, "how is it that you sneer down at us, at Jane- that I have failed so completely, that Thor and I have both failed so completely, if your teaching was wise and good? How can you stand there, lofty and untouched, and call down judgement and call me... I am your creature and you made me!"

Frigga tugged her back before Jane even knew she was heading forward.

"What was your real plan for me? Not what you told Mother, not whatever you have since told Thor: the true guile of Odin. I know your mind and its turnings, I had great cause to know. It was a business of survival, wasn't it?"
Odin slumped in his chair, warding this outburst off with a gesture. "I see she wakes you from your fatal convictions. Is that why you have brought her here?"

"That I have brought her and clothed her in royal colours should be an end, either cut me down a traitor or acknowledge her a citizen! And then leave her out of this." The last sentence was vicious, punctuated by his fist striking the floor. "You had a truce with Laufey, you spoke to him as to a rational man- with respect- but that truce was purchased in slaughter and pillage and you stole a helpless pawn to, to… explain to me, Father, please!"

His one cloudy blue eye clenched shut as if he'd been wounded and Odin leaned forward over a defensive arm across his chest. "There were dreams once, plots: there was a time I sought to write your fate. But I did not carry home a tool to lock in my vaults, it was not the king who plucked you up from the tundra; it was only the king who needed to justify an act of pity. At first there was intrigue, and then there was treasure- not only the casket, but of another kind. I've tried to tell you, Loki, that you are my son. When your mother held you in her arms surrounded by green growing things, to us you were re-born into the light of that Asgardian sun and so became our second child."

"But what about the Frost Giants and the stories?" Jane said, not daring to look away from Odin's face as she butted in again. She couldn't look at Loki.

The stare he gave her was withering, he clearly deeply resented her for opening her mouth, and she saw it was a little war in him whether he would deign to answer. But he looked down and maybe guilt won out. "He would never have known. It seemed… it seemed prudent that he not be treated differently."

Loki's mouth worked helplessly for a moment, his wide eyes lolling from father to mother in disbelief. He bent his head again. "All of my life I knew it wasn't true, I knew you were not- every tender touch and every patient word was not for me, it was always for Thor. All my life I thought it was something I had the power to change, that I had birthright and could work to deserve your regard if only I strove hard enough. It was always different and I thought that I could change it, you let me think so even though there was nothing I could do."

"I tried, my son, I tried to reach you. Was it only your brother who didn't heed? Or don't you hear only what you fear most being said? Don't you shut up your mind, attributing to malice what is only…" his voice faltered and it seemed to cost him a great deal to finished his thought, "...blunder."

"You understood me!" Loki accused heatedly. "It has been the greatest part of my shame after the failure itself to know that you always understood me perfectly. Every fear, every thought, every little manipulation, every bit of magic and schoolroom intrigue: everything I ever did to make a place for myself, to win your favour, you always knew."

Odin's expression softened further, the hint of a rueful smile lurking around his mouth. "And why would I know so well? Perhaps it is one's own frailties which one recognises most readily in others. Upon which it is most difficult to be lenient. Whose remedy is most elusive."

"One's..." Loki trailed off, shocked.

"I have said you are your father's son, child. Perhaps to your cost."

Loki scrubbed both hands over his face and dragged his fingers through his hair. "It did not offend you when Thor was your reflection, it didn't trouble you to see yourself looking back in the eyes of your own true blood."

Odin sighed, his white brows lifting in plaintive regret. "I wanted to protect you from the truth. That
lie has always been between us. To nurture your gifts was to shine a light upon them- can you not see how carefully a king must walk, how uncertain is his footing? To hold in your palm the good of Asgard, the peace of the Nine...

"I held it also, in this most profane hand." Loki lifted his right hand up, his lovely slender fingers casting long, spindly shadows across the opposite wall; he looked down at it as if it were some monstrous appendage and Jane struggled to imagine what he saw when he looked at himself. "For the good of Asgard, I was a traitor. First to her and then to myself. Pragmatism- the low for the great. The few for the many. That was the web I spun."

The unblinking eye sharpened in its gaze and Odin lowered his chin to his chest.

"Vanity and covetousness, cloaked in honour. Thor coveted glory when he overreached. Glory was not the object of my avarice."

Standing again and crossing the dais, Odin reached out, painfully hesitant, to rest his hand on Loki's shoulder. "I know."

Raising his head to look up at Odin, Loki's eyes glittered with tears, deep shadows of fatigue and stress hollowing out his face. "Father..."

The hand squeezed. "I too have seen as I wished… blind to what was. And that wrong has been returned to me tenfold. Three peoples have paid for it, some in blood. I have paid."

Jane was busy wondering if that was the closest thing to an admission of guilt and an apology that was ever going to come when Loki covered the hand on his shoulder with his own. "And I must pay for mine."

"Yes," the king agreed quietly.

"What?" she demanded, incensed. "Thor gets banished for what ends up being a couple days after breaking the law and starting a war and that's one hundred percent fair and he's clearly all cool with his hammer and his cape and everything, but he banishes himself for over a year and tries to accept a fucking death penalty three times and that's not good enough? You won't even tell him you were wrong, but that's not good enough?"

All eyes in the room were on her.

"Loki," she pleaded, "you don't… you can't just..."

"Lives were lost because of my actions, the Nine were endangered. I am responsible." He was looking at her with an unreadable expression, the dip under his cheekbone flickering with muscle tension.

"So was I," said a voice from the doorway. Thor's voice. God, how long had he been standing there? "Or have you forgotten the Jotuns I struck down unprovoked? Those were lives, brother, wound as tightly through the branches of the world's tree as our own. What justice would your throne pronounce on me?"

The whites showed all the way around Loki's irises as he stared at his brother. "I? My throne?"

"You were a prudent king and a temperate earthling. I trust your judgement."

"I would hear your answer," Odin said, folding his hands in front of him expectantly.
Loki looked around like a trapped animal, his glance finally falling on Jane. She didn't know what her face was doing but she tried to radiate some kind of reassurance. She hoped this was going somewhere good, that Thor's interference was a good thing. If not, she was going to crack heads. She was going to rain hell.

"I would..." he stumbled, worrying his thumb in an achingly familiar gesture, "I would..."

The brothers were locked on each other, all the weight of their years side by side straining between them. He couldn't lie. Thor wouldn't stand for it.

"If it were you, brother, and if it were me... I would detain you in secluded study of the Jotun until you were fit to be called the ambassador of that people in Asgard. I would bury you in learning and punish you with tedium and familiarity, then you would offer Laufey restitution in personal service to his throne. But that is not... that is not suitable in my case."

Frigga smiled warmly at him. "Its harshness does lack sting when visited upon a boy who was once said to haunt the palace library like a restless shade."

Loki's head dropped. "You make light... and I..." He wrung his hands, as if to clean them.

"If you will accept then the judgement of your king? Rather than what you would chose for yourself or what you would chose for your brother." Odin was sardonic. As if anyone had a choice but to take his judgement, really. "I will sentence you."

"Father," Thor tried to interrupt. Odin raised hand to silence him.

"Not for treason to Asgard. I sentence you for your treason to yourself. I do not take your power, nor do I take your life. I take from you your duty, I lift the weight of this kingdom from the palm of your hand, and I banish you from its service until you understand what it is which the crown serves. How do you bear my justice, Loki, Odin's son?"

Loki blinked at his father, baffled. "The crown serves Asgard."

"Does it?" Odin's one eye twinkled. "You are quick, my son, but are you wise?"

"Are you, Your Majesty?" Jane interjected, not dazzled by a little conditional acceptance.

Odin came down the steps towards her and she straightened her back as he approached, trying to match his regal posture and air of total certainty. But there was more regret in his face than she had thought, there was more strain than she had seen looking up at him from afar. Maybe he had tried. He'd failed, but maybe he'd tried.

"Perhaps not so much as I once thought, Jane Foster of Midgard." He studied her, distant and above her still, but maybe willing to be impressed. "What does mortal judgement call for?"

Well, that was complicated. "I think it would depend on how much of the story they heard." It was as close as she was prepared to come to throwing it in his face. She didn't want to start an intergalactic war or something. Even her sense of righteousness only extended so far.

But he seemed to take her meaning perfectly, and there was that vertigo feeling of looking into his eye, that deep and fathomless well of knowing. Like looking into the heart of a star, like still water with no bottom. He'd been a king long before the dawn of her civilisation.

"Yes," he murmured, a delicate spark of warmth in his tone, "humans and their stories."
"What does it mean— that he can't serve the kingdom?" she ventured.

Odin's attention turned back to Loki, who was swallowing compulsively and staring at the floor. "The court is forbidden to him, he is to know nothing of the workings of state, to speak politics to none of the high nobility, to fight no enemy on its behalf with word or weapon, and to have no authority to answer. Prove to me that you know what worthiness is with none of those trappings. Prove to me you know in what honour consists living as a man with no master.

"And I..." He stopped, his eye passing over Frigga and then Jane. "I will labour to prove to you that I know… also."

Thor and Loki exchanged a glance which seemed to contain novels.

"Come, Loki, speak to me further." Odin swept a hand towards the benches near the hearth and everyone else seemed to know it was a dismissal.

Jane jerked away as Thor tried to take her arm, "No, I… I don't want to..."

"You must rest, Jane." His voice was low and even, soothing her as if she were a spooked horse.

"I'm not leaving," she whispered insistently, dodging his hand, "no 'uncertainty'."

Thor shook his head slowly, his gaze intense with silent communication. "I will show you to your chambers. Tomorrow you can see the library."

Pausing in surprise, she tilted her head, trying to read his face for signs he was being genuine. "No little walk 'outside'?" She made subtle finger quotes and wiggled her eyebrows.

"No, Jane." He hooked his elbow out for her. "Sustenance and rest. Here."

She took his arm, clutching way tighter than necessary. "Okay. Okay, good. Thank you, Thor. Thanks."

She stretched her neck to look back the whole way out the door, craning to keep Loki in sight where he sat in front of the fire in a mute daze, a thick lock of hair falling across his forehead again even as his nervous fingers tried to smooth it back in place.
I've had this half written for months, but things have been Not Good and writing has been very hard. I'm sorry for the wait, please let me know what you think.

Jane had fully expected to stare out some latticed window at the stars all night long, to follow the little trails of colour and light through an alien sky with her eyes while trying to follow the threads of cause and effect in her life with her mind. She'd expected to be unable to slow her racing thoughts for a single moment even as she got into an impossibly comfortable, elaborate bed with piles of fluffy pillows and metres of silk-backed furs all around her. She blacked out the second her head hit the pillow. That jittery, anxious walk which had carried her further and further away from whatever was going down in the father-son tête-à-tête she'd left behind her had sapped the absolute last drop of her adrenaline.

She slept so soundly, in fact, that it felt as if she'd only barely closed her eyes when a gentle pressure on her shoulder roused her again. When she peeled open her eyes, there was a woman in a light grey robe standing over her holding a lamp. Made of something that looked like brass, the lamp was moulded into an S shape with a handle and a small platform where a pebble glowed in the centre of a bluish flame. Jane spent a full ten seconds struggling to decide if a burning pebble counted as magic or not before she managed to wrangle her focus and look up at the serving woman's face.

"Yes?" Her voice was scratchy and thick from sleep and she cleared her throat self-consciously. It was still dark in the room, but the window had been shuttered by a sliding wall and it could be three in the afternoon for all she could tell. "Is it morning?"

The servant shook her head, standing back demurely as Jane sat up. "It is the edge of dawn, Doctor Jane. His Highness the prince bid me summon you before the household wakes."

Which one? Jane wondered instantly, suddenly remembering to be nervous of the answer. She didn't ask, afraid to hesitate in front of the Asgardian woman, afraid that if Thor had sent her the question would give him more wrong impressions. Or maybe right ones. She wasn't sure which would be worse.

Hurriedly dressed in slightly more simple but still draped and layered green robes, she followed her guide through the palace, tiptoeing in her fancy slippers and thinking that even the rustle of her skirts seemed loud. The woman in grey admitted they were going to the library and Jane found herself dreading needing to face Thor in private, especially not knowing why he'd send someone to get her in secret before the sun was even up and not come himself. He seemed like the type to come himself, prince or no prince.

Jane spent the journey mentally preparing points to argue her case about staying in Asgard, and how to best warn him of the ferocity with which she would go kicking and screaming if it came to that. She wasn't going to give up.

The echo of her footsteps changed and she gasped as she looked up, taking in that they'd passed into a room which was at least five stories high and probably a mile long. The dozens of huge pillars in
parallel rows along the middle of the floor split into buttresses at each level, their arches spreading like a forest canopy to support walkways that ran the whole length of the room, providing access to shelves which stretched upward to the distant ceiling. Each shelf was filled to bursting with scrolls, gold tablets, books and strange glittering rods. Their numbers seemed uncountable, infinite repositories of data stacked in every inch of the massive space. The ceiling itself was some kind of solarium, appearing as if open to the sky and full of floating miniatures showing Asgard and its surrounding worlds, ropes of light winking in and out of existence to illustrate the branches of the World's Tree.

She watched the (holographic?) water pour over the model disc and remembered standing on the edge of that very same cliff for real just hours ago. Dizziness threatened and she snatched her attention away to the delicate metal bridges which crossed the centre of the room between the walkways. The thin metal was worked into more shapes of branches and vines, woven together in fractal patterns.

Not getting to stare for long, she barely took in the rest of her extraordinary surroundings because the servant was moving briskly on, escorting her under the eaves of the left side shelves into a close, cosy warren of stacks (which reminded her pleasantly of University) and around a corner to an alcove. There was a table tucked away there, set under a small brazier, and sitting at that table was not Thor, but Loki.

His head lifted as they approached. He looked awful, still in the clothes he'd been wearing the night before, visibly rumpled and with red, shadowed eyes. Jane doubted very much he'd been to sleep at all.

His gaze caught hers and Jane felt the rise of an hysterical desire to shake him, to demand to know why the hell he would shove her into a metaphorical escape pod without even- but he smiled tiredly at her, his dimples flashing in his cheeks and his eyes drifting shut for a moment. His eyelashes were even more shockingly black against his cheeks than usual, and his messy hair left to its own devices had become so curly that it looked inches shorter. The bulk of her anger leached out of her. How could she stay angry? She knew too much, now, understood his motives too well.

"Thank-you, Dúfa," he said very solemnly.

The servant startled, blinking at him in surprise before quickly bowing her head and raising a fist to her chest. "Your Highness honours me."

He nodded at her questioning look and waved his hand towards the door. She backed away three steps, bobbing her head deferentially, and then turned to leave at nearly a run.

Jane watched her retreat, then turned to stare at Loki.

He slid down in his chair, shutting his eyes again.

She was so worried and so annoyed and so uncertain that she didn't know how to move forward. "Well, I'm here now- still. I'm still here," she said provokingly. "You're still here, too, Your Highness."

Loki spread his fingers over his face, pressing them into his skin as he moaned at her pointed address. "Jane..."

Guilt mixed with her exasperation. "Are you okay?" He'd been through six kinds of emotional hell and it showed.
"No."

Her fearful rage was simmering again at that abrupt frankness, knowing his stark honesty was meant to be disarming, already sensing him planning to weasel away from this line of questioning. "Loki-

"Look," he sat up and started moving huge translucent sheets around on the table, turning them towards her, "it took hours, but I found them."

She leaned over, unable to stop herself from investigating. Star maps. Vaguely familiar ones, she could kind of tell through the alien notation and the shifting of the depictions as Loki ran his fingers over them. It was indicating something in the movement, but she couldn't understand what. "Those are..."

"Your own stars, yes. This is observational data from Midgard, gathered at least a generation ago. I thought it would interest you."

Jane's fists clenched and she took a deep breath. "Why did you do that?"

His gaze shot up to hers and just as quickly shot away. "They will be invaluable to your research. I can translate the charts, it won't take you long to pick up the notation. If you compare them to..."

"You know that's not what I meant. Why did you set me up to abandon you here, to leave you to some maybe terrible fate?"

He sighed, picking at the edge of a star chart. "It cannot be abandonment when you owe me nothing, when I should be here alone. It was I who failed to keep my word. Another rash choice, another bystander caught up in my wake. I shouldn't have promised you a useful time here for the sake of my will when that will is so weak I allowed my plans to collapse within moments of our arrival. I've imposed on you and kept you from your choice long enough."

If it weren't for that indelible image of him kneeling at his father's feet, completely prepared to die at his hand, she would have screamed in frustration. His complicated space tunic thing was as wrinkled as an old flannel shirt and his hair was escaping from behind his ears, he had graphite stains under his nails from making notes for her, and there was a deep well of compassion for him in her heart which would never run dry; enough to drown any stupid thing he did. For this one person, Jane Foster discovered a heretofore unknown depth in her patience.

"My choice," she repeated ponderously, setting that aside deliberately. "I don't know how much choice you're really letting me have when you do things like this. There's always a contingency plan so far. In case I decide my choice was wrong. In case it blows up in my face. I think I made myself pretty clear on the whole 'making decisions for me' thing, but let's put the 'weaving elaborate safety nets for me' thing on the table, too. Why did you call me here?"

Looking sulky and perhaps even guilty through her speech, he tapped his finger against the charts when she finally let him get a word in. "If it's an unwanted web you've been caught in, I will endeavour to dismantle it, but I am trying to keep up some of my end of the bargain. Is that not simply maintaining the terms? Would you have chosen differently if you'd known how little fruit the choice would bear?"

Sometimes it was like talking to a brick wall. On the subject of his own inherent value, he'd been utterly deafened. She decided to try the long way around. "Speaking of choices. Do you think you'll ever forgive him? Your dad?"

Loki frowned at the change of subject, his eyebrows going up in the middle with puppyish
confusion. "I don't know," he said reluctantly, as if wounded by the question. "He has not asked for my forgiveness. Does it matter?"

"Yes, of course it does. Of course it matters! He should ask, do you not get that? He needs to ask because it wasn't your fault he lied to you, and it wasn't your fault he brought you up to believe that your- that you being a giant or 'Elder Race' or whatever you guys call it means that you're not a person. There was nothing wrong with you." Jane paused, thinking of Frigga's obvious cognitive dissonance. "You were a Jotun to your mother until you were just a helpless baby in her arms, and then you became her baby. That means any of them could have been. I was a mortal to her until I was the woman who helped her sons, I was just a mortal to you- now I'm…?" She lifted her hands.

He shook his head. "That is different."

"It's not different. You're not evil, you weren't born wrong or bad, your life isn't worth less just like mine isn't. People are people. You could fit right in here if you actually bought this supposed ideal, what colour your blood was wouldn't have mattered, I feel like you completely succeeded in proving that when you decided to act exactly like your dad to win his approval." The more context she collected, the more clearly she saw what his supposedly nefarious plans were really all about and the more plain the line of cause and effect became. "Only maybe you had a point that being the great warrior king isn't always so great."

"Imagine me bestowing forgiveness and beatitudes as if I had any right to such things," he muttered bitterly. "There is an end even to my shamelessness. I wanted it to hurt him, when I let go. I hoped it would. A subtle thorn even in the moment of my surrender, a wound from the wounded."

Jane swallowed a painful lump in her throat and tried to think of how to reach him through the miasma of his self-hatred. "I want to tell you something, okay? I want to explain something to you." She walked closer and he tilted his head to look up at her, his eyes glittering in the firelight. "I..."

He waited.

"Look, I've never been satisfied, either. I thought I was for a while, I thought I was content, well-adjusted to my place in the scheme of things. But when I started seeing that freaky stuff in the sky, I realised nothing before that was the real deal, I realised I actually did need that vindication- me going after proof like a crazy person is not all pure-hearted wonder, there's wanting in there. And I wanted so badly to be right- I mean, I knew I was, but… When Thor told me I was right..." She wasn't sure how to get her point across, how to tell him the parts of himself that he hated most were the most normal. "You scared the shit out of me when you made those anti-protons, you know. Professionally, I was terrified."

Loki leaned on his fist and his lips just barely twitched up at one corner.

He didn't seem to get what she was driving at, but who could tell. How did you explain to someone whose jealousy was inextricably tied with wholly justified hurt and neglect and had festered poisonously into a black shroud over his whole life that jealousy could be just a feeling, momentary and powerless. She changed tack, "Did you do this all for me? Did you decide to come here because of me?"

He made a face. "I should think by now my reputation regarding altruism precedes me and I need not answer such a question."

"Your reputation is a bunch of bullshit. You do this on purpose! You can push me and push me, trying to play devil's advocate and show me how terrible you think you are, but I'm not your family, okay? You can keep trying to find the breaking point, the thing that will make me reject you, but all
Panting and hot, her cheeks stinging with a hard flush at overstepping so far onto treacherously sensitive ground, Jane covered her face with her hands. Accusations about taking sides and pitting herself against his family flashed through her mind, Frigga's not unkind but deeply wary probing at the forefront of her memory. She heard the chair scrape and then he was standing in front of her, pulling gently at her wrists so he could see her.

"Loki, I'm sorry I said that, I don't know if I'm making sense…" she looked up at him and felt a jolt. In her fancy slippers, barely more than thick silk socks, he towered over her even more than usual and it sent a burst of longing through her, making her want to let her aching head fall against his chest. To be swallowed up in his arms.

"On the contrary, you make such perfect sense, I feel a fool."

She made a disapproving noise. "Why a fool?"

"Some pernicious, greedy corner of my mind has ceaselessly sought to determine what I most could not bear about this ignoble homecoming and you have put your incisive little finger precisely upon it. Nothing has changed. It isn't even worse." He sighed. "How ungrateful I've been."

Suspicious, she studied his face, the slight sneer of his down turned mouth and the self-loathing in his eyes. "Ungrateful to me? I don't want payback like that. I keep telling you, I don't want some tit for tat, some trade. That's not how this works- it's not supposed to be how these things work."

He lifted his chin, looking down on her now. "I'm aware you know what you want, Jane. I have never doubted that."

"What does that mean? I don't want anything! You gift wrapped everything I could possibly have had as an ulterior motive and handed it to me with no strings attached and I am still here. Because I didn't come here for Thor, or for me- I didn't even come here for science as unbelievable as that sounds- I tried to tell you before we left: I came here for you."

"And perhaps it is admirable to a point, but pity…"

She put her hands on his shoulders for leverage, her tone hard and sharp, "This is not about pity."

He sank down to her level, so close his nose brushed hers. "Of course it is. Even Thor worked it out eventually. Guilt, pity, exchange, your damnable idea of fairness. What else could possibly possess you to-"

"It has nothing to do-!" Jane's throat spasmed and then the peace of complete terror settled over her, because she couldn't deny it to herself any more and it was even more important that she not deny it out loud, so she was going to say it and that was that. She took a deep breath. "Sweetheart, I don't pity you. I never have."

Scoffing at the endearment as if that was all the proof he needed, he straightened up. "What then? I've counted on it, and it has seemed I calculated correctly in every test. Isn't pity the only reason I live? Does he not claim it was pity that made him pluck me up from my death on an icy rock- or was it cunning, only? At best it was both, and that makes the pity all the more bitter."

Jane fell back on her heels, letting her hands slide down his chest to where she could feel his heart beating quickly under her palm. "Things can start out one way and get better. It happens. Look at us. Whatever you might have thought you could gain by working with me- is that still why you want to help me? Is that why you spent all night pulling these charts for me?"
He glanced back at the table, avoiding her eyes and edging away from her touch.

"Is that why you made me an astrolabe?"

He looked down at her sternum as if he expected to see it hanging there, and she swallowed a ridiculous flutter of self-consciousness that he knew about the necklace. She could guess when he'd seen it and under what circumstances.

"At first it was a lot of things, for me," she went on, ignoring her nerves, "you were exciting and mysterious, and everyone is aware that I can't resist a mystery. But it got more and more simple. You always knew what I needed, you spoke my language, you understood exactly how… alone it can make you, being… smart and maybe crazy, I guess. You listened. You understood my work, you understood me. You're the first person I've ever talked to who just… and I couldn't lose that. And then it got even simpler. It's so simple now."

"Is it," he muttered wearily. She reached up to run her thumb over his cheekbone, her pulse thundering in her ears.

"Yes. I'm here now because I love you."

His eyes doubled in size and shot to hers, staring in paralysed shock, then almost as quickly his head dropped and his lips drew back in a grimace. "Don't be ridiculous."

It was doubtless a sign of how warped and abnormal she was that her reaction wasn't to be stung or even angry. Instead, she was frustrated with a tinge of sad amusement. Maybe his absurdity was wearing her down. Maybe she just knew him too well to be even a little surprised. In fact, she was even less surprised than she might have thought she would be. He was so much work, more than she had ever imagined putting in to a relationship with another human being (he isn't human, though, is he, Jane?), but somehow for the first time in her life it was work she didn't remotely mind doing.

"What's in it for me?" she asked gently, stroking his face. Even tired and miserable and confused, he was so beautiful it felt like she shouldn't be allowed to touch him this way. "Really think about it and ask yourself: what have I got to gain? Why would I lie to you? Look at me. Loki, look at me. I put my life in your hands. I trusted you all along because you were so patient with me, and little did I know then that you could sure afford to be patient, because everything I was so scared to tell you, you already knew. But I don't care about that. I got myself in this anyway, in the middle of all this cosmic drama that's so much bigger than anything- I'm just human, you know! And I'm in it because…

"I didn't ask you to stay because of the bridge or for your brains or because I wanted to see Thor again or so I could go to Asgard. I asked if you wanted to stay because I wanted you to be there. I want to be with you."

"Do you? What an idle whim it must be if you have not already realised... How badly do you want it?" he muttered, still leaning over and away from her, his voice low and scratchy. "If I must always remain here, subject to Odin's whims, would you throw yourself on his mercy? If I said I was going to run away across the universe, never returning to Midgard, would you come? If I told you I could give you a life as long as mine, would you accept it?"

The fear was a constant hum, down her spine, through the tips of her fingers, like the beginnings of frostbite, tingling with ominous premonition, but it was as nothing compared to the rising sun which was her relief. The warm rays of maybe maybe maybe…

"Sure," she said, her voice a bit high pitched but strong enough. You wanted to be challenged, Jane,
Loki shook his head despairingly. "No negotiation? No goodbyes to Erik Selvig and Miss Lewis and your mother? No ultimatums? You've never been so short-sighted, Jane. First you must extract the promises, the terms- there should be so much you require in promises before-"

"There's nothing required, not for this." She knew what he was really getting at. It wasn't about not needing to consult her for travel plans. "You don't have to say anything, you don't have to do anything. How I feel is going to be the same. That's the way it is, no matter what. It's unconditional."

He peeked at her from under his eyelashes, not turning his head. "A terribly imprudent word. I would have laid down worlds at your feet if you had asked."

She couldn't stop the shiver which ran through her. "I know."

He noticed it, flashing a reflexive grim smile at the pyrrhic victory. "And so even part of you admits it... still, I am a monster."

"I still love you."

The distress with which he gaped at her made her want to hug him until he couldn't breathe, to hold him so tight he'd believe her.

"This isn't a contest, it's not something you earn." She paused, thinking of what she could say to make him see. "And I wasn't moping around waiting for Thor to come back, you weren't a replacement or a means to an end, that's never what held me up. It wouldn't have worked out if he did. We'd have bored each other pretty soon. Or I would have pushed him away. I always used to blame my exes for... but it was me. I didn't have time for them. I didn't want to make time."

A wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows. "But...?"

"Yeah. Crazy how long it took me to realise I always had time for you. We've noted before, I'm not exactly a patient person, but I waited for the truth. Everyone told me I was stupid, including me, but I still waited."

"You're stubborn," he said.

"When it's worth it," she shot back.

"Worth it to discover a lie and the coward who lies it? If you'd been killed by the Destroyer, I would have thought nothing of it- I would have used your death to punish my brother. A whim of mine could snuff out the light of your whole world. If not for the bridge, if not for curiosity nor honour, why am I 'worth it'? How could I be?"

"I could give you a list of qualities and virtues, but none of it would be why. There isn't one reason, there isn't an equation." Jane struggled to swallow tears, shutting her eyes against them. "Loki, sweetheart, you just are."

His knuckles brushed her cheek and she lifted her head. He watched the water droplets roll over his fingers, then opened his hand to touch her jaw, so, so delicately. She strained towards the contact as it started to withdraw and he leaned down, his eyes shifting between both of hers. Searching for something.

"Do you trust me or not?" she pressed, the words wobbly but insistent. Uncompromising.
Loki caught his breath, as if wanting to object to the question, but he wasn't hypocrite enough to argue that wasn't the bottom line. He knew it was perfectly just. "It isn't you that I… doubt."

"It is, though. Don't I know my own mind? Didn't you say that?"

"Jane Foster…" he whispered, half offended and half awed that she'd trapped him with his own words.

She couldn't even feel the satisfaction in that right now. She repeated, "Do you trust me?"

His eyes, lovely and huge and vulnerable, shimmered more and more as he studied her, the terror and reluctance he couldn't conquer written so clearly in them. He reached for her, watching his fingertips trace over her brow and down her cheek, resting a moment on the beauty spot by her mouth. His lips pursed and relaxed as he considered and she smiled slightly at the familiar tic. Still, she could see how much it pained him that he couldn't just… she let her hand rest at his throat, meeting his gaze again as the contact startled him.

"The norns twined the thread of your life with mine as a judgement, I think. Which of us is judged?"

"Is that fatalism?" she wondered, sliding the pads of her fingers around the curve of his neck. His skin was flawless, soft and smooth as alabaster.

He scoffed quietly. "Perhaps. Can not I also be contrary?"

"Do you trust me?" she asked again mercilessly, not letting him slip away from the question.

Loki shut his eyes and let his forehead rest against hers. "Of course I do. I must."

"You definitely should."

"Yes," he gradually agreed, then tipped his chin to the side and brushed his lips over her mouth. He did it again, lingering there while she held her breath. "Yes, I should."

He lunged forward and she was swept up in his arms, her feet dangling in the air as he held her tight and bent his head to kiss her with sudden fervour. She pushed her fingers into his hair and sucked at his bottom lip, pressing forward invitingly until he completely relaxed his jaw and they could steal oxygen from each other's panting breaths.

She let her hand trail down his shoulder while her tongue traced the scar above his lip, his cupid's bow, and then pushed into his mouth. The lines of his clavicle and then the hard muscle of his chest were barely obscured by the velvety fabric of his tunic, the heat of his skin warming her palm as his lips moved desperately against hers.

When her thigh bumped something solid, she came up for air and realised he'd put her down on the edge of the table where he'd been organising star charts for her, pages and pages of careful notes in his rune-style handwriting on semi-translucent spacey paper spread over every inch of the surface. He tried so hard to always be doing something for her, to have something to give her any time her attention lingered on him too long.

She swallowed tears and turned to look at him, his messy black curls falling voluminously around his face and his pale cheeks flushed. She smiled, trailing her eyes downward over the hint of exposed skin at his collar, along his arms, feeling the warm grip of his hands wrapped around her waist. His thumbs almost met over her belly button, she noticed, the observation a little dizzying.

His delicate brows lifted in a slightly playful frown as he followed her gaze, his mouth a disconcerted
"So little. Tiny, fragile mortal Jane," he mused, pressing inwards to show off how he could almost span her waist.

"Excuse you, I'm a normal size. You're just enormous."

"Mmmm." He turned his hands, sliding his thumbs along the base of her ribs, his fingers brushing her shoulder blades around her back and sending electric tingles through her skin. "My condolences. It cannot be helped."

"Yeah, how terrible for me," she said, as sarcastically as humanly possible. "No one wants a tall, graceful, super-strong-"

He kissed her again, softly teasing her with pressure before pulling back, over and over. Then he looked at her, his eyes still somehow uncertain, bluer than a calm sea and twice as deep.

"I was never actually lonely before," she told him, hoping to break through, "even in school, being called a crackpot, in my desert with my tumble weeds and my irritating non-science intern. It was okay, I was busy and I couldn't be bothered. But I never knew then how it would feel to have someone who… and now…"

"Are you not afraid?" he finally said, encompassing far more than just this moment, and neatly drawing them to the crux of the issue. Jane lingered over it, wanting to remember it. The rich baritone timbre of his voice, the rounded vowels and soft Rs of his lilting accent, everything was so important to notice, to keep.

"Terrified."

Loki smiled, there was serenity and doubt and fond affection all tied up in it, and he lifted his hand to put her hair behind her ear, stroking her cheek afterwards with cautious, tentative caresses. "Oh, beloved. How can I hope to admire your courage so well as you deserve?"

Butterflies swirled in her stomach and she blinked rapidly to clear her vision. "Beloved?"

"Best beloved. Jane."

She leaned forward and tipped his face up to hers, kissing his closed eyelids and the bridge of his nose, then running the tip of her own nose down the valley of his cheek and along his jaw before burying her face in his neck, mouthing the tense line of muscle as he angled his head for her. "You can't have anything without having something to lose," she said, between touches. "Everything I've ever done that was most worth doing scared me a little. Must be a good sign you scare me a lot."

"I fear there can be no peace in such a life. Nor any life with me in it. You deserve better."

His shirt smelled of pine smoke and leather, like an alpine cottage, and she found it comforting to detect the slight hint of petrichor, of ozone, that was his magic. She took a long breath. "I don't know what it'll be, but I want you to be in it. You were willing to die for them, for me, for principle- but… I don't want you to die for me. I don't want you to die."

He pushed her further back on the desk and wrapped his arms around her, sitting down in his chair again and resting his head in her lap. At great length, he sighed, toying with a fold of her dress. "It is much less to ask than what you do want of me."

Jane stroked his hair, her fingers tracing over the curve of his ear. "And what's that?"
"For me to live. Live differently."

He was quiet for a long time, his breaths coming with deliberate slowness.

"Would you really give up your own realm and your own people to stay with me? If that were the only way?"

Her hand stilled on his head and she kept her gaze on his lips, starkly red against his pale skin, to avoid looking at his eyes. Would she really? Forever? Her chest tightened at the thought, but the resolution was firm. "If I had to, if it came down to either or... then... yes."

Sitting up, he lifted his hands to cup her jaw and pull her face down to his. "But I would never ask that of you."

"I know," she said, and some tears escaped as she tried to blink them back.

He smiled again. "No, no. Not because I don't believe you."

It was like a punch in the gut, hearing him say that, having him read her mind again. "Then...?"

"I thought it was quite, quite obvious, Jane Foster," he said, letting her sink towards him and into his lap. He nudged her with his chin, supporting her back with his arm as he teased her into place so her could kiss her again.

She melted into him, altogether too cognisant of his body heat and the firmness of his thigh muscles under her weight as she opened her mouth to him for a long, languid exploration.

"Another moment of innocent compassion from the merely pitiful, brother?" said a voice from the doorway which caused both their heads to turn sharply, violently breaking the kiss. "Do I misunderstand again?"

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