Summary

When Jane Foster discovers an object on a course for the inner solar system, it looks like a job for the Avengers. But when what looked like a comet turns out to be a refugee ship from another galaxy, it's not clear whose job this is anymore. Tony Stark and the Vision find they have an uncomfortable amount in common with the creatures called the Brisings, while Jane learns that the aliens are being followed by something they thought they'd left behind five million years ago. Set post-AOU, pre-CW.

Notes

I put off posting this for a very long time. It started out as a story about Tony and the Vision meeting some aliens. It somehow became an epic about communication, redemption, self-sacrifice, quantum physics, and Howard the Duck. I blame Loki.
It was, in fact, a dark and stormy night when it all began, but that made no difference at all to Jane Foster. The stars were quite unaffected by things like the cyclone that was pummeling Kawakawa that particular February night – as was the telescope Jane had been using to study them, serene in its orbit high above the Earth's turbulent atmosphere. The rain pounding against the windows of her motel room actually made for a nice, soothing white noise to work by as she sipped a cup of jasmine tea and went through her data.

“It's really coming down out there,” Darcy observed, pulling the curtains aside to peek out.

“Mm-hm.” Jane continued examining tables of measurements as the lights flickered and thunder shook the Opua Rainforest.

“No, really,” said Darcy. “This is like a Thor-Throws-A-Tantrum level of storm happening. Are you totally sure he went back to Asgard?”

“Totally,” Jane promised. “He said he had to talk to his dad about some stuff to do with the Infinity Stones.” Infinity Stones sounded interesting, and Jane had some theories about their nature based on her own rather personal experience of the aether, but at the moment those were little more than hunches. Right now, she was more concerned with a unique phenomenon she'd noticed quite by accident – a tiny gravitational lensing event passing across the face of the Andromeda Galaxy.

“Darcy,” she said, “look at this.” She pulled up a photograph and pointed to a tiny bright ring superimposed on the faraway galaxy. “See that? I think that's a wandering black hole! It's well above the plane of the galaxy, and there is no star associated with it. It can't be in orbit of anything except the galactic center. Look what it's doing to the light of Andromeda.”

Darcy left the window and came to lean over Jane's shoulder and look. “What's that smudge?” she asked, pointing to a dark smear in the lower corner.

“Some kind of foreground object,” Jane replied. She'd had to mask it out of the image so that its brightness didn't drown the fainter details she was trying to see. “Probably something in the Kuiper Belt, a dwarf planet or comet.” Very ordinary, and not at all interesting from the point of view of somebody who wanted answers to the big questions: what was the universe, where had it come from, and where was it going to go. “Now listen, if we can keep an eye on this lensing event, we can start to plot its orbit. I don't think it can have formed where it is, so we may be able to figure out where it came from and how it got here from there. Maybe we can even get an idea of where the Dark Matter is in our galaxy! That'll give us the closest thing we've got to an outside perspective on the Milky Way.” That was exciting: a chance to map the galaxy in a way nobody ever had before.

“Meaning we're gonna spend the next year or so looking very hard at something we can't actually see.” Darcy straightened up and pumped a fist in the air. “Science!”

“Science!” Jane agreed cheerfully. “We've still got that generator, right? I want to be able to keep working if the storm takes the power out.”


And work, they did. The gravitational lens hovering between Earth and Andromeda continued to occupy Jane for the next three months, taking her from New Zealand to South Africa to the Canaries.
in search of the best possible view. In Santa Cruz de la Palma, on a blindingly sunny day that could not have been more different from the stormy February evening when Darcy had first drawn attention to the Smudge, when Jane realized something wasn't right.

The black hole was doing more or less exactly what Jane expected it to do, bobbing around the void, minding its own business except for the light it refracted from the galaxy behind it. It would be months more before they got a real idea of its proper motion. But the probable Kuiper Belt object, the one Darcy had christened the Smudge, never went away. It continued to hang around in the corners of Jane's photographs, spilling light in places where she didn't want it and growing slowly but steadily bigger and brighter – which only made sense, she thought, if the damned thing were coming right at them.

That... might be bad.

Jane didn't want to waste her time on this. Somebody else, somewhere, had to be monitoring this thing. Plotting random debris as it wandered around the outer solar system was a job for graduate students, not Nobel Prize-winners. When Jane checked the usual e-journals and websites, however, she couldn't find anyone else who'd noticed it. The Smudge was big and bright by the standards of somebody trying to make out irregularities in the light of a galaxy two and a half million light years away, but it would be faint indeed to people studying the outer solar system, so much closer to home.

Luckily, the math she needed to do was easy, the sort that could be done with a high school graphing calculator. All she had to do was plug in the object's position over time and let the computer solve for a conic section. After three months, Jane had no shortage of data. She typed in her measurements and hit enter, hoping for an answer that indicated the thing would go away soon.

The graph she got was both a surprise and a disappointment. The disappointment was that the Smudge was headed more or less directly into the inner solar system, meaning it was only going to get more and more in the way of her observations as time went on. The surprise was that its path was not an ellipse centered on the Sun, like any self-respecting orbit ought to be. It wasn't even a parabola, like the long-period comets that flung themselves out into the cosmos never to be seen again. It was a hyperbola. The Smudge was under the influence of the Sun's gravity, but it was not bound to it.

Jane's stomach turned itself inside-out as she realized what that must mean. This object had to have come from outside the solar system, which made it suddenly very interesting indeed. With the exception of a few weird Chi'Tauri alloys that had been far too extensively worked to be informative, humanity had only been able to directly sample one little cranny of the universe. Material from a truly extrasolar object could tell them about isotope ratios, the abundance of organic molecules, and all sorts of other things about the composition of the galaxy. Darcy's smudge was, in its own way, just as important as the black hole Jane had been watching – and at the speed it was moving, they might have even less time to take advantage of that.

She grabbed her phone.

“What can I do you for?” Darcy asked when she picked up. She never bothered with hello when she knew it was Jane.

“Where are you?” Jane wanted to know.

“Ian and I went to Taburiente Crater,” Darcy said. “We asked you this morning if you wanted to come, remember?”

When she thought about it, Jane did vaguely remember that, but it seemed unimportant. “I need you
“Coming to visit?” Jane could picture the puzzled frown on Darcy's face. “Are we talking about an earth-shattering kaboom, end of civilization kind of visit?”

“No,” Jane said firmly. “Well... probably not.” She'd need to plot the orbit more precisely in order to tell, but space was very big and Earth only a tiny, moving target. “Like... eighty-eight percent sure not.”

“So... twelve percent maybe?” asked Darcy.

“Just come back,” Jane told her. “The Crater will still be there.”

“What's going on?” Ian's muffled voice said somewhere in the background.

“We're all going to die,” Darcy told him casually, “so just a day that ends in y, really.” She spoke into the phone again. “Okay, we're coming, but if this thing is gonna hit us, then I'm dragging you kicking and screaming to see the Crater before we get a bigger crater smacked on top of it.” Then she ended the call – because Darcy never bothered with goodbye when she knew it was Jane, either.

Darcy and Ian arrived at the hotel in Santa Cruz about an hour and a half later, by which time Jane had covered the table with calculations and was now lying on the floor, drawing circles on a bedsheet. She needed so many things. She needed pictures of the object that showed more detail than just a bright Smudge. She needed more precise positional data. She needed spectra. Most of all, she needed to know exactly how much time they had to study this thing before it was gone forever.

“Okay, yeah, this is serious,” said Darcy as she walked in and dumped her backpack in a chair.

“When Jane's doing math on the floor it means the space-time continuum is in some shit.”

“I realize we've had some back luck in the past,” Jane said crossly, “but there's no need to assume that everything we study might mean the end of the world.” She picked herself up and put a cap on her sharpie. “Darcy, I need you to watch my computer like a hawk and let me know the moment I get any email. I've asked everybody I know for pictures from that sector of the sky. Ian, I'm gonna give you graph points and I need you to draw them there.” She pointed to the sheet. It belonged to the hotel, but she didn't care – she'd plotted out an x and y axis in red and drawn a map of the solar system in black, with the orbits of Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, and Jupiter to scale, and smaller circle marking the asteroid belt. “Eric's gonna see if he can get us an afternoon with the astronomical supercomputer at Culver, but until then, we're doing this the old-fashioned way.”

Ian grabbed marker and knelt down to begin. “Call 'em.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon finding the exact positions where the Smudge had shown up, and translating those into coordinates that could be plotted on the sheet. From that they could make a better guess at its future course. No matter how excited Jane was about what the object might represent, even she couldn't help but find the results a little worrying.

“Email!” Darcy announced.

Jane jumped, nearly spilling a stack of papers from her desk. “Who's it from?”

Darcy clicked the link. “Oh, never mind,” she said. “It's just your phone bill. How much data did you use last month?”

Jane just shook her head. “Okay, Ian. Azimuth zero hours, forty-nine minutes, forty-seven point four
“Email!” Darcy said again. “This one's from somebody in Chile.”

That was more like it. Observatories in the Andes were in the perfect place to have recent pictures of the Smudge. “Let's see,” she said.

Sure enough, they'd sent a photograph. The resolution wasn't great, and even with the telescope's adaptive optics there was a bit of atmospheric distortion, but even so it contained new and surprising information. The Smudge was not one object, but a dozen small ones in a line, like a string of beads. It reminded Jane of the fragments of Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9, which had hit Jupiter in 1994. Jane had been thirteen at the time, and the event had made a great impression on her. She'd sat in front of the television for hours, eyes wide as she took in the news of explosions the size of the Earth and all that scientists could learn just by watching them.

According to the scale information the Chilean team had provided, the largest of the objects was around fourteen kilometres across. Three or four more were eight to ten kilometres, and there was a trail of smaller ones, five or six hundred thousand metres in diameter. Mere pebbles, as such things went, but Jane couldn't help thinking that these cosmic pebbles would be more than enough to wipe every trace of multicellular life from any planet that got in their way.

“Dr. Foster?” asked Ian. “What was the rest of the coordinate?”

Jane looked over her shoulder at the path he was plotting. It was impossible to be more specific at this kind of scale – she really needed that astronomical computer – but the objects definitely appeared to be heading for a close encounter with the inner planets. Jupiter wasn't going to be able to catch them like it had with Shoemaker-Levy 9. It was way around the other side of the Sun.

Darcy was looking at the same thing. “Are we still at eighty-eight percent not going to die?” she asked. “Because I think you might wanna call Thor. This is gonna require some Avenging.”

“There's no need to jump to conclusions,” said Jane. “We haven't even heard back from Eric yet.”

Eric didn't get in touch until very late that evening, which was, itself, worrying. If he wasn't calling them back, Jane thought, it was because he was checking and double-checking, wanting to be absolutely sure before he delivered his results. Jane kept working in order to keep her mind off it, but there was only so much she could do with what she had. Eventually, she wandered out onto the hotel balcony so she wouldn't have to watch Darcy and Ian make out on the sofa, and stood there staring up at the night sky.

There was the Andromeda Galaxy, a hazy blue patch just above the red stars Almach and Mirach. It looked very much fainter and more diffuse to the naked eye than it did in the long-exposure photographs most people were familiar with, more like a wisp of cloud than an island universe all its own. Somewhere between Jane and that far-off swirl of stars was her wandering black hole – and somewhere, equally invisible but very much closer, was the approaching Smudge.

It needed a better name. By the rules of the International Astronomical Union, it would be Comet Foster-Lewis 1. Giving it a real name would require some more thought.

Jane's phone beeped, letting her know she had a text. Her heart beat a little faster as she flipped the screen and held it up to read.

*Closest approach Nov 9. It's gonna be a near thing.*
Jane swallowed hard. If Eric didn't have a definitive yes or no for her, it meant he thought it was too close to call. The Smudge might pass them by, or it might not. Only more time and better measurements would tell – which in turn meant that in that moment, out of seven billion people on the planet Earth, Jane Foster and Eric Selvig were the only ones who knew the date the world might be going to end.

Darcy was right after all. It was time to call Thor.

Tony Stark was going through some calculations of his own when Pepper returned to the Tower penthouse that night. He heard her come in and kick her shoes off with a thump – which was somewhat worrying. She was usually more gentle with her eight hundred dollar Louboutins. Tony closed the holoscreen he'd been working with, and climbed the steps to the living room in time to see her sit down heavily on one of the sofas.

“Everything okay, Pep?” he asked.

She turned her head to look at him, grimacing. “You would not believe the day I've had.”

Tony sat down beside her, and she moved to lie with her long legs hanging over the arm of the sofa and her head in his lap. “Do you need me to vaporize anybody?” Tony asked sympathetically.

“Yeah. The fashion editor of the Times and about six other people.” Pepper pulled her hair out of its ponytail with a miserable face. “Who decided that the colours I wear were going to affect the company's stock? Nobody ever sold their shares because of something you work to work.”

“That's not true,” Tony said. “The day I showed up naked after Beyoncé's Oscar party, we dipped five points.”

Pepper began to smile. “I forgot about that. I think I blocked it out.”

He bent down to kiss her forehead. “How about I make dinner tonight?”

“Sure.” She giggled. “Wiener and beans sounds good.”

“Very funny. I've been practicing,” Tony said proudly. “I still can't make a decent omelet, but I can throw together a stir-fry. FRIDAY's been giving me lessons.”

“All right,” said Pepper. “I've got Pepto-Bismal in the cupboard if we need it.”

“But first,” Tony said, “you have to get off of me.”

She shook her head. “Nope,” she said, rolling over onto her side and curling up, head still in Tony's lap. “I'm comfortable.”

The conversation might have continued in this vein for several more minutes, but there was a sudden flash of brilliantly coloured light through the big penthouse windows, accompanied by a vibration shook the entire Tower. Pepper sat up, startled and Tony got to his feet.

“Is that Thor?” asked Pepper.

“Nobody else feels the need to make an entrance like that every single time,” Tony replied, heading for the stairs to go meet his guest. “It's just unnecessary.”

“What is it when you do it, then?” Pepper asked, following him up.
“Stylish,” he said.

FRIDAY had recognized Thor, and when Tony and Pepper entered the hangar he was already inside, his red cape morphing into a dark blue cloak with an ornate pin at one shoulder. He greeted them with a raised right hand.

“Hey, Thunder-Thighs,” said Tony. “How’s the quest for the Infinity Stones?” If Thor were back on Earth, the most likely reason was because he’d learned something about those mysterious cosmic objects, and needed some kind of help in dealing with them.

“It proceeds,” said Thor, “but I have not come about that.” His face was grim. “I fear your world is in grave danger.”

Tony hesitated a moment and Pepper, worried about him, put a hand on his arm. A threat to the world that did not come from the Infinity Stones? What had happened? Was it something he’d done? He would hardly have been surprised anymore. All he said, however, was “again?”

“Jane has been in contact with me,” Thor explained. “There is a group of large objects in the outer solar system that may be on a collision course with your planet.”

That shouldn’t have been a relief, but Tony sighed anyway. Not his fault, then. He could deal with that. Tony had technically retired from Avenging and taken up a support position as Team Sugar Daddy – but if the world needed saving from an outside threat, instead of from him again... he could do that.

“A meteor?” asked Pepper, gripping Tony's arm a little tighter.

“A dozen meteors,” said Thor gravely. “Do not fear, Virginia. Jane will be flying in from Morocco with her friends, and with their help, we will find a way to counter this threat.” He sounded entirely confident, and it seemed to help Pepper feel better.

“Suddenly, my day doesn’t seem so bad,” she said, and bit her lip. “Where are the others? I know Rhodey's giving a speech at the Air Force Academy this weekend.”

“Steve and Sam are in Omsk, tracking down a lead about their missing friend,” said Tony. That made sense – if he were looking for a guy called the Winter Soldier, he too would have considered Siberia a good place to start. “Clint's changing diapers in Iowa and I think Romanov went with him so he and Laura can catch some sleep now and then. Fury’s vanished to wherever it is he goes, and Wanda and the Vision are in Sokovia cleaning up land mines.” He didn't mention Bruce. Nobody had seen Bruce since their final showdown with Ultron. Wherever he was, he clearly didn't want to be found, and Tony was willing to give him the space – especially since he suspected that he was one of the things Bruce was hiding from. “Who should I call?” he asked Thor. “If the bad guy here is a giant rock from space, I'm not sure all of us are going to be useful.”

“Call as many as are willing and able to help,” said Thor. “Jane will arrive on Monday morning. There is no hurry,” he promised. “The objects will not come dangerously near for months yet.”

“Well, that's something,” said Tony. “An enemy we have time to plan for? Too much of that, and the Avengers are gonna get lazy.”

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Thor had never gotten the hang of driving a car, so on Monday morning it was Tony and Pepper who went to JFK airport to pick up Jane. Tony had never met Jane Foster in person, though he'd seen her on the news, and his first impression was astonishment at how tiny she was. At five foot three, she was barely as tall as Natasha. He would have expected the woman who'd won the heart of
the Mighty Thor to be a little more physically impressive.

“Dr. Foster!” Pepper waved to get her attention as Jane entered the airport lobby, trundling a suitcase behind her. “Over here!”

She spotted them and grinned. “Ms. Potts! It's great to meet you finally!”

“Please, call me Pepper.” The two women hugged like old friends, while Jane's three companions – a dark-haired woman, a thin young man, and an older fellow in a colourful sweater – joined them.

“Nice to meet you, too, Mr. Stark,” Jane added, shaking Tony's hand more formally. “Thor's told me a lot about you.” Her voice managed to suggest that some of it had been complimentary. “This is my intern, Darcy Lewis, her intern, Ian Webster, and I think you've met my thesis advisor, Dr. Eric Selvig.”

The thin kid nodded, and the young woman held up a hand and wiggled her fingers in a little wave.

“We have met, yes,” said Dr. Selvig. “I'm afraid it wasn't under very pleasant circumstances.”

“It wasn't at my best back then, either,” Tony said. He honestly wasn't sure what his 'best' even was, or whether he had one. “All in the past. Thor's waiting for us at our new HQ.”

Happy was outside with a limousine for all the extra people. He got their luggage into the back, and everybody piled in for the drive to the new Avengers building upstate.

“Helen mentioned meeting you at the Nobel Prize dinner,” Pepper said to Jane.

“Helen Cho?” Jane asked eagerly. “Is she here?”

“Not at the moment. She went back to Seoul for a relative's wedding,” Pepper said. “Hopefully she'll stop by before you head out again. We can grab Maria and Natasha and have a Girls' Night,” she suggested.

“Wait... do you guys all know each other by proxy already?” asked Tony.

Nobody answered him. “Has anybody heard from Sif?” asked Darcy. “She checked in months ago, and there hasn't been a peep since.”

“She's fine,” Pepper promised. “Melinda's looking out for her.”

“Oh, good.” Jane smiled.

“Apparently, the answer is yes,” Tony said, mostly to himself. He wondered if there were some kind of conspiracy going on among the women in his life... he would have to look into that. Who the hell were Sif and Melinda? “Dr. Foster,” he said, “how do you contact Thor when he's on Asgard?”

Tony had been wondering about that.

“I've got this device he gave me,” Jane began. “It's...

Darcy interrupted. “The Quantum Pot!” she said, delighted. “Oh, he's gonna love the Quantum Pot!”

“It looks like a squat little cauldron that projects a life-sized hologram,” Jane explained. “It can communicate over immense distances instantaneously, or even between parallel planes, like Earth and Asgard. I haven't had time to study it properly.”

“She's afraid if she takes it apart, she won't be able to put it back together,” Darcy said.
I've had other projects on the go,” Jane corrected her. “I think it works through quantum entanglement. The atoms in the pot are in a permanent state of interaction with the atoms at the destination, so they can affect each other without the time lag normally imposed by the speed of light.”

Tony frowned. “Quantum entanglement only allows two observers at different locations to see the same system at the same time,” he said. “You can't use it to transmit information.”

“We can't,” said Jane. “The Aesir may have found some loopholes in quantum theory that we haven't noticed yet.”

That might well be – and for what Tony had in mind for dealing with their visitor from the outer solar system, it could be useful. He would have to talk to Thor about it.

To nobody's surprise, Barton and Natasha both asked to be excused from Avengers Versus Giant Rock from Space – they operated best within an atmosphere. Nobody could find Fury to talk to him, and Maria Hill hinted rather strongly that he wouldn't have wanted to be bothered with this anyway, as it was definitely beyond anything that could reasonably be considered his jurisdiction. Rhodey had come, though, as had Wanda and the Vision, and Steve and Sam showed up to see what was going on. For the plan forming in Tony's mind, that was more than enough.

They all gathered in a glass-walled conference room at Avengers HQ so that Jane and her friends could give their presentation. She closed the blinds and took full advantage of the mainframe's holographic display to show the path she'd calculated for the train of objects.

“Of course we want to keep it from hitting us,” Jane said, “but I'm also concerned that we get some samples for study. As far as I can figure, this object came from somewhere in the vicinity of Nu Andromedae, a binary star about six hundred light years away. It's a chance to look at material from outside the solar system in context that we may never get again. At least, not until humans have mastered interstellar travel for ourselves, and we have no idea how long that might take.”

“You got a name for this thing?” asked Steve.

Darcy beamed. “Yes, we do! We discovered it, so we totally get to name it.”

“Are you naming it after yourselves?” asked Tony with a raised eyebrow. Not that it would be a problem – astronomers were actually encouraged to do so.

“Nope,” said Darcy. “We came up with a real name for it, from mythology and everything.” She and Jane exchanged a glance and a smile. “Jane said it looked like beads on a string. So there's a really famous necklace in the same mythology Thor comes from...”

“You speak of Freja's necklace, Brisingr,” said Thor.

“Exactly!” Darcy nodded. “This is Comet Brisingr!”

“Freja will be pleased that you thought of her,” said Thor. “Less so that you have given the name of her necklace to something so destructive.”

Jane returned to her presentation. “We're not in a rush,” she assured everybody. “It's still far beyond the planets. Beyond Pluto, even.”

“Pluto's a planet,” said Tony.
“Pluto has never been a planet.” Jane glared at him. “It was initially misclassified.”

Tony had initially assumed that their shared interest in physics and astronomy meant that he and Jane would get along fine. With that pronouncement, he realized he'd been wrong. “I will buy Pluto and have it declared a plane,” he said.

“You can't buy Pluto,” said Jane. “The UN has ruled that the planets of the solar system are the collective property of mankind! Nobody can own them!”

“You just said Pluto’s not a planet. Therefore I can buy it if I want,” said Tony firmly, arms crossed on his chest.

Jane rolled her eyes. Next to Tony, Pepper rubbed her forehead, and Steve muttered something under his breath that may or may not have been the words *Earth's mightiest heroes*.

“Anyway,” Jane went on, “that's the situation. We have some time to play with. The closer it gets, the easier it'll be for us to reach it, but the more difficult it'll be to change the object's course enough to keep it from hitting anything.”

“Don't worry,” said Tony. “I've got the start of a plan already.”

“You do?” Jane was both startled and pleased.

“We can fragment it before it gets out of the Kuiper Belt,” Tony said, “and get you plenty of samples while we're there.” He looked around the room. “I won't need you guys,” he told Wanda and the Vision, “you can go back to fomenting revolution in the Balkans. I won't need you, either,” he added, looking at Steve and Sam. “Go freeze your balls in Russia. I'm gonna need you,” he pointed to Rhodey, “and you,” he said to Thor. After a moment's thought, he looked at Pepper and said, “and you.”

“Me?” asked Pepper.

“You, me, and Rhodey have special skills,” said Tony. “Now, Thor. Miss Lewis was right – I love the Quantum Pot. Can you get me one?”
The Iron Valkyries

It took Tony a few days to put his plan together properly, with all the blueprints and timetables and other things people like Fury and Hill tended to insist on, but by the end of the week he had it. Actually building everything took a little longer, even with his robots and FRIDAY to fabricate the pieces. Getting some of the materials required asking Natasha to do him a few favours that may have been slightly illegal, and at least one that was definitely very illegal. She told him he could pay her back in Amedei Porcelana and Chateau Margaux – which he did. She shared it with Pepper and Jane, but when Tony asked for a piece of the chocolate, Natasha snatched it away.

Definitely a conspiracy.

Finally, there was the crucial bit he needed Thor's help with. Once that was in place, it was time for the Great Unveiling. Tony actually was quite pleased with himself for once, rather than just putting on a show of it, as he led the group into the hangar at Avengers HQ. Rhodey, Pepper, Natasha, and Thor were all there, as well as Steve and the Vision, who'd decided to hang around and see where this went. And of course there was Dr. Foster and her group. Tony noticed that Jane looked like she hadn't been sleeping well, but wasn't about to bring it up. Hopefully what she saw today would reassure her.

“Ninety-nine knights of the air,” he sang to himself as he punched in the code to open the security vault. “In super high-tech jet fighters... every one's a silver hero, every one's a Captain Kirk...”

“I can't see Bruce Willis singing as he saves the world,” Darcy remarked.

Jane shot her what looked like a warning glance. “What have I told you?” she asked.

Darcy pouted. “That I'm fired if I ever reference that movie in your presence again?”

“This is strike two,” said Jane firmly.

“With orders to identify, clarify and classify...” Tony stepped back as the doors rumbled open, and gestured grandly to what was on display within. “Scrambled in the summer sky, as ninety-nine red balloons go by!”

In the vault were three gleaming machines the size and shape of Iron Man suits. One was the familiar scarlet and gold, another the pewter-gray of War Machine. The third was cherry red, the colour of a new Corvette, with silver accents. Tony met Pepper's eyes and gave her a small smile, and was somewhat disappointed when it wasn't returned.

“No,” she said immediately. “Absolutely not. I'm putting my foot down now.”

Tony was about to protest that she was the only person, other than himself and Rhodey, to have any practical experience in a suit – but that wasn't what she was upset out.

“You're not flying out to the edge of the solar system to destroy this thing in person!” Pepper continued. “And you're not asking anybody else to do it, either. It's just too dangerous. There has got to be a better way.”

Tony shook his head and came up to put his hands on her shoulders. “Pepper, will you relax?” he asked. “I anticipated your concerns, and I've already taken them into account.” He looked at the ceiling. “Open 'em up, FRIDAY.”
All three suits slid open to reveal their cargo. There was no room inside them for a pilot. Instead, the torso and thighs of each contained a number of small warheads.

“Where did you get those?” asked Rhodey.

“They appear to have come from the payload of a Soviet Sickle-B intercontinental missile,” the Vision observed.

Tony ignored both of them. “These are completely remote,” he explained to the group. “There are three people in this room who have previously operated a suit, and for whom I have existing programming. It works like this.” He stood in front of the three machines with his arms outstretched on either side of them. “Give me the interface.”

A holographic wireframe of the suit appeared around him, and the HUD popped into place. Behind him, the red and gold drone folded shut again and assumed the same position. Tony struck several Kung Fu movie poses in a row, while the remote suit followed his lead.

“We'll launch them from Puerto Rico and get a boost from the rotation of the Earth,” he said. “With no people inside we can repulsors to push the acceleration to nearly six percent of the speed of light, which will get us to the outer solar system in just about eleven days and incidentally set a speed record for a human-built object while we're at it. Fly them out to the Kuiper Belt on autopilot, then use the remote mode to plant the bombs. Objects as small as the components of Brisingr barely have enough gravity to hold themselves together. Set off a couple of these, and they'll fall apart like dry snowballs.” That was, after all, more or less what a comet was. “So we'll photograph and map each piece, grab some chunks for Dr. Foster to study, and then blow the whole thing once the drones are safely on their way back home. By the time the debris reaches the inner solar system it'll have dispersed so much it won't be a danger to anybody, and we'll all have champagne and call it a day!”

Tony was grinning broadly as he shut down the hologram. The system would allow the pilots to make the split-second decisions that the mission would require, using three drones allowed for redundancy if something went wrong, and he, Rhodey, and Pepper would be safe and sound on Earth the whole time. As genius plans went, this was definitely one of his proudest. He looked at his audience, and waited for the inevitable objection.

Jane obligingly provided it. “It won't work,” she said. “A signal from earth will take sixteen hours to reach that distance. You couldn't control them in real time.”

“We have it taken care of, Jane,” said Thor.

“Odin was kind enough to loan us some Asgardian RC gear,” said Tony.

“On the understanding that it must be returned,” Thor noted. “Father does not trust mortals with our technology.”

“You'd think we'd screwed up horribly the last time we got a hold of it or something,” Tony deadpanned. He probably ought to be more grateful – Tony himself was likely at least fifty percent of the reason Odin didn't want humans having this stuff – but Tony was not the grateful type, at least not in front of Thor. “But yes,” he went on, addressing the whole group again. “Using what Dr. Foster calls Quantum Pot Technology, we can, in fact, control the drones instantaneously without breaking the universe's speed limit.”

“I named it that, actually,” said Darcy.

“Where did you get the warheads?” Steve asked suspiciously. He glanced at Natasha, who shrugged
and popped a square of chocolate into her mouth.

Tony folded his arms across his chest. “Look, we're gonna avert the threat, save the world, advance human knowledge, and nobody's gonna get hurt. Can you at least pretend to be impressed?”

“Do the cargo compartments seal?” asked Jane. “We can't allow the extrasolar material to be contaminated by contact with Earth's atmosphere.”

“Absolutely,” said Tony. “Once the drones are in space they'll vent any air left in them, and the combination of acceleration and solar radiation ought to kill any microbes stowed away on board. Samples will be bagged up to stay clean until we can get them into a vacuum chamber here on Earth. I've calculated a selection of launch windows over the next couple of weeks. Once FRIDAY's done running the simulations to figure out which one's most efficient, we'll all head for Mayagüez. Saving the world and a tropical vacation! What do you say?”

Rhodey nodded. “All right,” he said. “I'm in.”

“Great!” Tony clapped his old friend on the back – at least somebody still had faith in him. “Pepper? How about you?”

She was smiling now. “Will you make me one of those to wear to work?” she asked, looking at the cherry-coloured suit. “I'd like to see what the fashion editor of the Times will have to say about that.”

“Absolutely!” Tony put his other arm around her shoulders. “Ladies and gentlemen, let's save the world. Again!”

Jane had no objections to Stark's plan. She'd called Thor because, as Darcy had said, the Avengers seemed like the best people to deal with the threat posed by an incoming comet, and they seemed to have everything under control for the time being. If she wasn't sleeping, it was for other reasons entirely.

Two nights after Stark showed them his drones, she woke in tears from a nightmare about black skies over a red-tinted world, and pulled the pillow over her head so she could cry for a few minutes without anybody hearing her. Once she'd managed to stop, she got up and splashed some water on her face and then went quietly down to the kitchen. Pepper Potts had mentioned a container of Haagen-Dazs in the freezer. Jane dug it out, grabbed a spoon, and sat down on one of the tall barstools by the window, fully intending to eat the whole thing.

She'd also brought along a notebook, and while she ate she flipped through it to an empty page and began working on her orbital calculations again, refining them with the new measurements she'd been making. Despite their best efforts, Jane and Eric were having trouble getting a fix on the velocity of the objects. Perhaps there was more matter in the outer solar system than previously thought, and the gravity from that was affecting Brisingr's motion.

Darcy had been right, hadn't she? Everything Jane Foster studied really did seem to threaten the end of the world. Why was that? Why did they keep stumbling into destruction? Was it just a coincidence, or was Jane herself somehow at fault? It made her think of the ancient Greek story of Pandora, who couldn't keep herself from looking inside a box even when she knew it was full of horrible things. Was that Jane's inevitable fate, too, to be her own undoing through sheer insatiable curiosity?

“Good evening, Dr. Foster,” said a voice.

Jane sat up straight and turned around, startled. She hadn't expected anybody else to be awake – but
her visitor was a being who did not sleep. It was the Vision.

She hadn't yet spoken to the Vision and didn't know much about him, but was aware that he was some kind of sentient robot. Thor had spoken very highly of him, but Jane had found meeting him to be deeply unnerving without quite being sure why. Maybe it was because he looked so human and yet so not. Or maybe it was because of the stone set in his forehead, the Mind Gem. Either way, the effect was somewhat mitigated by the fact that, despite being an impossibly advanced combination of machine and artificial flesh, the Vision was currently wearing a cable-knit sweater and loafers.

“Good morning, rather,” he corrected himself, in a precise and soothing British accent, the kind of voice Jane associated mostly with BBC nature documentaries. “I didn't expect to find anyone awake.”

Jane guiltily pushed the tub of ice cream aside. “Couldn't sleep,” she said.

“Troubling circumstances have that effect on the human nervous system,” the Vision agreed. “But since you're awake now, I was hoping we could speak privately.” He sat down on the stool next to her. “I believe you and I have something in common.”

“Do we?” asked Jane, with a puzzled frown. What could she possibly have in common with... whatever he was, exactly?

“Yes,” he said. “We are each the wielder of an Infinity Stone.”

Jane looked up at the glowing stone in his forehead, then quickly turned her eyes back to her pages of calculations. “I never exactly wielded the Aether. The Reality Gem,” she said. “It's more like it wielded me. It...” She paused, biting her lip, and trying to figure out how to describe an experience that English really hadn't ever invented words for. Jane didn't want to anthropomorphize something she believed to be a force of nature, and yet she supposed that the Vision would understand why she might do so, if anyone would. “It wanted Malekith. Or maybe Malekith wanted it. I feel like he could communicate with it somehow, and I was just a tool it was using to get to him.”

She chanced another look at the Vision, and found him nodding slowly. He didn't have an unfriendly face, if she could ignore that it was red and green... Jane just couldn't stop thinking about how very not human it was. That was entirely irrational, of course. Thor wasn't human either, no matter what he looked like.

“So you don't want things?” she asked. “I mean, you'd know...”

“I'm afraid I don't,” the Vision said. “The Mind Gem does seem to have an intelligence of its own, although whether that is a self-aware intelligence like yours or mine, I couldn't tell you. I cannot communicate with it. It activated my own mind, and I can wield its power to a limited extent, but if it has intentions or thoughts of its own they remain unknowable.”

“I see,” said Jane, disappointed. “So you don't know if it wants to be used? Because... I could feel the Aether draining me, but something told me I could make myself stronger again by using it. The problem was that all it could be used for was destruction.”

She shivered as the memory hung in front of her eyes: walking out onto the balcony in Asgard and staring up at a black sky boiling above a red world. She'd felt like every breath was a terrible effort, like the world was falling out from under her feet, but at the same time she'd known exactly how to fix that. She could stretch out a hand and take in all the energy from this entire city, this entire world and all the people in it, and make herself so strong that nothing could conquer her. She had resisted, however, because she knew that was a thought that came from the Aether, not from her. Jane was
tempted by many things: by ice cream, by expensive lego sets, and most of all by knowledge – but never by power.

“The stones need not destroy,” said the Vision. “They can create. This one created me. You could have destroyed universes with the Reality Gem, but you could also have built them.”

“I don't think that was what it wanted,” said Jane. “Or maybe it wasn't what Malekith wanted. I can't tell the difference.” She reached for another spoonful of ice cream, and changed the subject. “Thor says you can lift Mjolnir.”

“I can,” the Vision affirmed. “I had no idea it was even a feat until I saw how astonished they all were.”

“How much does it weigh?” asked Jane. The hammer's mass was clearly decoupled in some way from its inertia, which should not have been possible according to the laws of physics as she understood them.

“Not quite twenty kilograms,” the Vision replied.

That was about as much as a really full suitcase, or an economy-sized bag of dog food. “Interesting,” said Jane.

“Have you ever tried to lift it?” the Vision asked. “I understand that almost all of the Avengers made an attempt, without success.”

Jane shook her head, laughing. “Oh, no! I figured I'd only embarrass myself if I couldn't – and Thor's ego might not be able to take it if I could.” This was better. This was a joke, and the Vision smiled in appreciation of it. If he could laugh at a joke, Jane decided, then Infinity Stone or no Infinity Stone, he was probably okay after all.

The three drones needed a name. It had apparently taken Jane and her colleagues a few days to come up with the name ‘Brisingr’ for their discovery, but now that they had that, additional names were going to be easy. All they had to do was stick to the theme, and it took Tony all of thirty seconds to come up with one. They were, he declared, the Iron Valkyries.

Blastoff in Mayagüez went ahead on schedule. Stark Industries had a pad there it used for launching its communications satellites, and this was more than adequate for three drones in the nose of an old Soviet Topol-M rocket that had been given a quick Avengers-style coat of paint. Steve continued to look a little leery of Tony's choice of launch vehicles, while Natasha ate the last of her chocolate with a quiet smile on her face. Jane and company, rather surprisingly, didn't even attend. Apparently they would rather spend their time in Puerto Rico visiting the Aricebo Radio Observatory.

Once that was done, nothing more could happen until the drones reached the Kuiper Belt. This took eleven days, four hours, and twenty-two minutes, which was a very long time to sit twiddling their thumbs and waiting. The Guinness Record Book people did call about the craft's velocity, and Tony told them he'd get back to them. He had better things to do right now than see his name in the news – which was a sentence the Tony Stark of ten years ago would never have even thought, let alone spoken.

It was 11:27 AM on a Wednesday morning when Tony's phone beeped to let him know they were approaching their objective. He texted Pepper and Rhodey.

Showtime.
Tony walked into the interface room with a swagger in his step that he was used to faking, but couldn't remember really feeling in years. Not since those heady first few weeks when the world was still reeling from the revelation of Iron Man's identity, back when he'd felt like he was doing something good instead of slowly drowning. He was even singing again as he fired up the equipment.

“Ninety-nine red balloons floating in the summer sky... panic bells, it's red alert, there's something here from somewhere else...”

The lights dimmed, the shutters closed, and a set of holoscreens popped up around Tony's desk showing the final stage of the launch vehicle speeding through space. Although this looked like footage taken from outside the craft, it was actually a simulation based on feeds from the onboard instruments, transmitted back to Earth by the Asgardian Quantum Pot. At an instruction from the computer, the bolts holding the module closed blew, and the outer panels drifted away, revealing the three suits tucked into their compartments inside like bee larvae in a honeycomb.

Lights flickered on in the drones' chests and eyes as the onboard reactors fired up. The holoscreens scrolled through boot-up protocols and diagnostics. Tony moved information around, checking and double-checking. Everything looked good.

“The war machine springs to life...” Tony entered a set of commands. “Opens up one eager eye...”

The drones straightened out from the fetal positions they'd been packed in for transport, and moved away from the main capsule as they tested their thrusters and sensors.

“Focusing it on the sky as ninety-nine red balloons go by!” Tony smiled.

“All systems are go, boss, the computer confirmed. Green lights all around.

“Thanks, FRIDAY,” said Tony with a nod. “Give me a feed.”

Video from all three suits came up, first separately, and then combined into a single three-dimensional holograms that showed the train of objects and cloud of surrounding debris in great detail. This was by far the best image they'd had yet of Brisingr, and Tony sat studying it thoughtfully for a few minutes. There was the one large object at the head of the chain, five smaller ones following it, and then thirteen tiny ones trailing behind. The destruction of the big would would probably destabilize the paths of the others enough to keep them from coming close to Earth. Most of the train's mass and inertia would be located in that single piece.

The objects' gravitational field suggests they are denser than we anticipated, FRIDAY noted. They appear to be stony or metallic, rather than icy as we first assumed, with correspondingly higher masses.

“How much higher?” asked Tony.

Well within mission parameters, FRIDAY assured him. About point seven grams per cubic centimetre. Dr. Foster will probably be interested in the information. Should I inform her?

“I think you'd better,” said Tony. “If she misses this, she'll never forgive us. As long as she's not off visiting Fermilab or something.”

As it turned out, she was not. Jane entered the room a few minutes later, and her face lit up with delight when she saw the holograms Tony was studying. “Oh, my god,” she said, hurrying up for a look of her own. “That is spectacular! Can we enlarge it?”
“Sure,” said Tony, and blew it up to fill half the room. At this scale the view was somewhat pixelated, but Jane didn't seem to mind.

“That's great! That's perfect!” Jane stepped into the display, delighted by the surface detail visible. The objects were dark and colourless, pockmarked by hundreds of tiny craters. “They're so round! I wouldn't have expected something so small to pull itself into a sphere. Do we have anything on their composition? A spectrum?”

*There are some preliminary results, said FRIDAY. The surrounding cloud appears to consist mostly of Oort Cloud material the objects swept up as they passed through...*

“We need to get a sample of that, too!” Jane interrupted. “Nobody's ever directly sampled the Oort Cloud! I'll have to call somebody on Rosetta and get their results for comparison. 67P-Churyumov-Gerasimenko is a Kuiper Belt object. This could tell us how much mixing goes in between different regions of the outer solar system. There's still so much that goes on out there that we have absolutely no idea of.”

Tony realized he was smiling as he listened to her. He remembered being that young and that excited about the future and the ways he could contribute to it. In school he'd been full of enthusiasm for robotics and AI and clean energy and all the wonderful places these things could take humanity. Somehow as Tony got older, the idea of the future had become less romantic and more workaday. Seeing how much Jane Foster still loved her work made him wonder what he'd lost along the way, that the prospect of discovery didn't have the same effect on him.

*Colonel Rhodes has arrived, said FRIDAY. And Miss Potts will be here in about fifteen minutes.*

“Great,” said Tony. “Make sure we have coffee on tap. We might have a very long afternoon ahead of us.”

Rhodey walked in, dressed in a blue and gray Air Force track suit, and got himself a cup of black coffee. Jane was explaining to him how she'd originally figured the components of Brisingr must be remnants of a single object broken apart by whatever cataclysm had launched it into the interstellar void (but now realized that was impossible), when Pepper walked in. Tony had told them both to wear comfortable clothes they could move in. Pepper had changed into a t-shirt and yoga pants, but was still wearing her high heels.

“Your timing was perfect,” she said. “I got to stand up in the middle of a meeting with the finances department and tell them I was sorry to run off, but the Avengers needed me!”

“You're welcome,” said Tony. “Did your wardrobe meet with the fashion world's approval today?”

“I haven't looked,” she admitted, leaving her shoes very neatly next to the door.

Tony cracked his knuckles. “All right,” he said. “The Iron Valkyries are up and running, so let's get this thing done and be home for dinner.”

Jane sat down to watch while Tony, Rhodey, and Pepper arranged themselves on a set of marks painted on the floor, and FRIDAY drew the holographic interfaces in the air around them. Pepper was breathing pretty hard, so Tony smiled to reassure her.

“Just like we practiced,” he said. “It'll follow the motions of your body. The computer will make most of the course corrections for you, and the repulsors work exactly like they do on the suit. You were pretty good with those.”

Pepper nodded. “I'm okay,” she promised.
“FRIDAY,” said Tony. “Heads-up displays, please.”

The room got darker while the familiar suit controls and readouts appeared around Tony's head. These went through their own set of checks before giving a green light, and the video feed appeared. Suddenly it was as if Tony were in space, flying along with Rhodey on his right and Pepper on his left as the three approached Brisingr.

Jane had described the fragments as pebbles in the vastness of space, and it was true that the mist-shrouded objects were tiny by the standards of the outer solar system – but the largest was still two-thirds the size of Manhattan, and that was very big indeed on a human scale. The view from the suit gave a far more visceral sense of this size than any holographic display could have, and also showed just how near to spherical they really were. The largest one, in the lead, appeared to have a big dark crater in it, but the rest looked nearly perfect except for a few curious ridges that seemed to form definite angles.

“Tony,” Rhodey said cautiously. “Are you sure these things are comets?”

“They're almost... faceted,” Pepper agreed. There was so much interstellar gunk caked on the objects that the details were somewhat obscured, but the closer they got, the more the smaller ones did appear to be made of flat polygons, as if they were low-resolution renders... or geodesic spheres. “They don't look natural.”

“Is that an artifact of the video feed?” asked Tony. The graphics ought to have been better than that, but he preferred that explanation to the only other one that sprang to mind.

No, it's not, said FRIDAY, and lines appeared in the HUD, delineating a faceted surface on parts of several objects. These do appear to be artificial.

Tony went cold. It couldn't be, he told himself. It was an illusion that would go away as they got closer. Brisingr was not allowed to be another alien invasion. He couldn't take another alien invasion. He wasn't ready.

Unfortunately, the closer they got to the city-sized objects, the more unnatural they looked. They were clearly very old, and Tony soon realized that the large one wasn't cratered – it was a fat ring with an open space straight through the middle, like a giant nut in search of a bolt. That shape simply could not happen in nature. If that hadn't been enough, the oncoming solar wind had begun to wear away the dust and ices that had accumulated on the shoulders of this ring, revealing a dull metallic finish underneath. As if these were chunks of tarnished silver, surfing against the stellar tide.

“That's no moon,” said Rhodey with grim humour.

“What do we do?” asked Pepper.

For a moment Tony couldn't answer. He couldn't even breathe. His irregular heartbeat was drowning out everything else, and the memory of an AI voice echoed in his head. My diagnosis is that you have experienced a severe anxiety attack.

Then something inside him hardened. This was exactly what he'd feared, but this time he had come with the firepower to do something about it. Whatever was inside those objects, wherever it had come from, he could stop it right here before it got anywhere near the Earth.

“Tony?” Pepper asked.

“We do what we came to do,” Tony said. “We destroy those things.” He opened his drone, and took out one of the warheads. To hell with Jane's samples – she'd just have to do without them.
“JARVIS? Any signs of life?”

*Doesn’t look that way,* FRIDAY said in reply. *The outer skins are barely warmer than the cosmic background. The vessels appear to have warm cores, but they're still far too cold to contain any living things that aren't in a state of deep hibernation.*

“Good,” said Tony. “They'll never know what hit them.” He revved up his repulsors and flew towards the nearest object.

Without any warning, his display fizzled and went dark. Startled, Tony stumbled a couple of steps forward and then fell onto his hands and knees on the floor of the control room in Avengers HQ. Jane, who'd been sitting at the desk watching the holograms, turned her chair around and got up to help him.

“*Tony!*” Pepper shrieked. On the render, Tony saw her suit streak towards the cloud of debris where his had been.

“No! I'm okay! We're on remote, remember?” he asked, but then her interface vanished as a second explosion appeared on the display, and a moment later she was staggering into his arms.

“Oh, my god,” she said as he hugged her. “I didn't even see what happened! The suit just suddenly blew to pieces and for a moment I forgot...”

“I'm fine. You're fine. We're all fine,” said Tony. He stroked her hair and rocked her gently back and forth – but they weren't fine. Nothing was fine. It was starting all over again, just as Tony had feared it would. Just as he'd seen it in his nightmares, and in Wanda's vision. *They were coming back.*

The lights came up a moment later, as Rhodey's display also evaporated, and with it the larger hologram of the vessels. “What just happened?” Rhodey demanded.

*Brisingr appears to have defended itself with a concentrated spacetime density wave,* was FRIDAY’s analysis. *There was no physical projectile, but the distortion tore the drones apart. With all three of them destroyed, I can't take any more readings. Sorry, everybody.*

Tony buried his face in Pepper's shoulder and shut his eyes, willing himself not to cry. This was a bad dream. He would wake up in a moment, and then they could go blow up a train of comet fragments like he'd planned. Nothing but a bad dream... but the warmth of Pepper's body in his arms just felt so *real,* as did the cold lump that had settled into the pit of his stomach.

“What do we do?” Pepper asked for a second time.

Tony couldn't answer. It was Rhodey who patted him on the back and said, “I don't know.”
Pandora

Brisingr had defended itself automatically. There was an onboard computer, but it had been in low-power mode for uncountable millennia, and was not scheduled to reactivate fully for another few weeks yet. But an approaching source of neutron flux was one of the things that could damage the all-important Cargo, and so the chain of ships had swatted the interlopers away almost subconsciously, as a human being might brush off a fly. As it did, it noted that there were three, that they were structured objects, and that they appeared to be communicating with one another.

*That* was sufficient cause for an early awakening.

After millions of years of the machine equivalent of semi-consciousness, an intelligence stirred to life in the ring of the largest ship in Brisingr. It metaphorically stretched and dusted itself off, found everything to be in working order, and then began to replay and analyze what just had happened. There did not appear to be any more hostile craft on the way, but these three alone were still deeply troubling. This system wasn't inhabited. This system *couldn't* be inhabited. Everything depended on it. Finding an aboriginal species waiting for them here... that would ruin *everything*.

The intelligence found no more signs of life in its immediate surroundings, so it turned its gaze inward, towards the star. There it found two icy worlds of water and ammonia, all storms and dusty rings with no solid surfaces. Further in were two giant bodies of hydrogen and helium, crackling with lightning and howling with hurricanes, each escorting a veritable menagerie of moons. Then there was a ring of debris, followed by a lifeless, airless ball of rusted stone, and then...

... *tell you my sins – you can sharpen your...*

... *Ring has awoken. It's heard it's master's...*

... *man für Ufos aus dem All – Darum schickte...*

... *win or you die, there is no middle...*

... *of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the...*

... *can't go on together – with suspicious minds – and we...*

And *then* there was a little planet with signals rolling off it at a million different frequencies, spreading out across the cosmos like the fog from dry ice. The intelligence of Brisingr couldn't make sense of any of it, but it was still recognizably *information*, organized in ways that simply did not occur at random. Where there was *information*, there were *minds*.

The intelligence considered its options for a moment. The Mission was a gamble – it always had been, the greatest possible gamble, and by its very nature it could not be aborted or started over. What to do in the face of this new complication was not a decision this intelligence could make alone. It needed to consult a being whose fate was far more intimately tied to what it had just discovered.

It was time.

*Initiating life support.*

*Good morning, Mother. We have much to discuss.*
This time they really had assembled the Avengers, including a few Jane had not met before. Everybody who'd been at her previous presentation had showed up for this time, too, along with several new faces. There was Nick Fury, whom she sort of already knew through Eric; Maria Hill, whom she'd met at a reception dinner once; and Clint Barton, who had his baby son sleeping in a sling because, he'd explained, his wife had a commitment at the older kids' school that she couldn't back out of at such short notice. Wanda Maximoff was back, too, and Jane thought she looked surprisingly nervous and thin for a person who could manipulate minds and matter at will.

One of the staff members had mentioned that Wanda, like Jane, was Jewish, as if that would make them immediate friends. It made Jane want to avoid the woman just to spite that guy.

All these people, plus Stark and Pepper, Rogers and Wilson, Romanov and Rhodes and the Vision, Thor and Darcy and Eric and of course Jane herself, were sitting down both sides of a long conference room table with one of their new images of Brisingr hovering above it. FRIDAY had helpfully superimposed a grid to show the faceted structure of the objects, and more data was on display on the black glass surface of the table for people to study if they wanted. Nobody was paying very much attention to that, though – every eye in the room was on Jane herself.

Jane wasn't often nervous when giving presentations. Normally, the only thing she loved more than learning something was sharing what she'd learned with other people. Right now, however, she felt a little shaky and ill. Why were all these important and powerful people looking at her as if she were some kind of expert? Right now she knew exactly as much about Brisingr's origin and mission, if it had one, as anybody else in the room. She hadn't even had the more personal contact with it that Stark, Pepper, and Colonel Rhodes had.

But Pepper and Rhodes weren't astrophysicists, and Stark looked fairly ill, himself, so Jane told them what she knew as best she could. She tried to emphasize what they didn't know, as well – she had a feeling that what they didn't know about this object would ultimately be far more important.

"It's no wonder we couldn't get a fix on its velocity," she said, bringing up a map that overlaid all her various attempts to put the object's motion together. "We were assuming that it would be speeding up under the influence of the Sun's gravity, like a comet. But now that we know it's under intelligent control, when we look back at our measurements we find that it's slowing down." It was so obvious in hindsight that Jane wanted to slap herself. She could have put this together two weeks ago and avoided the events of yesterday afternoon entirely. "We don't know its original speed, of course, so I can't say where it came from. Might have been Nu Andromedae, as I originally thought, or it might have been much, much further."

"But where is it going?" asked Fury.

"It's still coming our way," Jane replied, "but since we can't predict its course corrections, we have no idea what its final destination will be. At the moment, it still looks like it's heading into the inner solar system. We do know it's not just passing through," she added. "If that were true it would be letting the solar gravity well carry it, instead of fighting it by decelerating."

The worrying implications hung in the air. What was there in the inner solar system that aliens could possibly come so far to see, if it wasn't Earth?

"We don't really have any reason to think it's hostile," Colonel Rhodes offered.

"Yes, we do," said Stark grimly. "Experience."

After making sure he had everybody's attention, he set down an empty cut-crystal whiskey glass he'd been playing with – Pepper and the Vision, sitting on either side of him, had been taking turns
getting subtly in the way every time he'd made a move to get up and fill it – and raked his hands through his hair. “The Chi'Tauri weren't here to hold hands and sing Kumbaya,” Stark said. “Neither were your Dark Elves.” He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Pepper reached over to squeeze his shoulder and he flinched at the touch. “Nothing comes to Earth from somewhere else because they want to make new friends.”


Stark looked up, blinking as if he’d completely forgotten that Thor was, technically, an alien. Jane couldn’t blame him for that – it was an easy thing to forget, really – and she couldn’t help noticing that Stark himself looked terrible. His face was pale and his eyes were shadowed, and she suspected that he'd slept very little last night, if indeed he'd slept at all.

“Thor didn't come here in a giant-ass spaceship,” he said finally. “When you're just dropping in to say hello, you don't do it in a panzer tank.” He laced his fingers together and leaned forward, staring at the tabletop.

“Their original intentions may not matter now,” said Hill. “As far as they're concerned, we've already attacked them.”

Stark's head snapped up again. “You're not going to pin this one on me,” he said.


“This is not my fault!” Stark insisted.

“Relax, Stark!” Fury ordered. “Nobody's blaming anybody for anything. You did what you thought was best with the information available to you – any of the others could have vetoed it and they didn't, so if there's blame to be laid it goes to everybody. Now.” He stood up straight. “We have better information, so what are we going to do with it?”

Captain America looked across the table at Wanda. “Can you read anything from them?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not from here,” she said, in her soft Slavic accent. “They are too far away.”

“It'll be another four hours before we know if we've triggered any additional activity in Brisingr,” Jane added. “The light from the encounter yesterday is still somewhere out around Neptune.” The laws of physics might have been what held the universe together, but they could be awfully inconvenient sometimes.

“By then it might be too late to do anything about it,” said Stark, spinning his empty glass on its rim. “For all we know they've got a Death Star out there, and we'll only see it coming half a second before they blow the Earth to bits.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Why would they come all this way just to blow up a planet that has never done anything to them?” she asked. “Nu Andromedae is over six hundred light years away. From that distance there would be no indication that Earth is even inhabited. We've only been transmitting signals into space for the last hundred years or so.”

“But if they have no idea we're here, why would they bother coming?” asked Romanov.

“I don't have enough evidence to come to a conclusion,” said Jane, “and neither do any of you. We don't even know there's anybody on board. It could be an unmanned probe.” It wasn't that Jane was not afraid of what might be happening – she was frankly terrified – but jumping to conclusions wouldn't get them anywhere. Science was about forming hypotheses based on the available
information, testing them, and then revising them, and Jane was sure, as many other astronomers had been before her, that if there were one thing humanity would have in common with any other intelligence in the galaxy, it was science.

“I tend to agree with Dr. Foster,” said the Vision. “Assuming they are hostile may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. We cannot form a plan until we have more information, and in order to get it, we will have to attempt communication with Brisingr.”

“You really think they want to talk?” asked Stark. “It looks to me like they’re the shoot first, ask questions later type.”

“The ship must be controlled by some kind of computer,” the Vision went on, as if Stark had not spoken, “and that computer will be programmed according to the same basic mathematical principles as computers on Earth, including myself.”

Romanov nodded. “Colossus and Guardian began communicating by exchanging the times tables,” she said.

“There's no more universal language than binary,” Jane agreed.

“Wait,” Darcy protested. “Why is she allowed to reference movies?”

“Because she references good movies,” Jane said firmly.

The Vision kept talking. “Even if the system isn't designed for communication, I may be able to read its files and determine what the purpose of the craft might be. That will give us somewhere to start from.”

That sounded like a good idea to Jane, but the same old problem reared its ugly head again: physics. “How are you going to get in touch with it?” she asked. “We're limited to the speed of light again now. We don't have any more Quantum Pots.” She looked at Thor.

“Father is unlikely to give us permission to use another after the last three were all destroyed,” he admitted unhappily.

“I can do it,” Wanda offered.

“You said you couldn't read them from here,” Fury said.

“I can try an astral projection,” she said. “If I have an image of where I want to go. I've done it before – I took Pietro to the Moon once, to see where the Americans had landed.” She smiled a bit at the memory, but it faded quickly. “And I can take the Vision with me – he has a mind I can touch.”

“Is that dangerous?” asked the Vision.

“I've done it before,” she repeated.

“Very well,” the android said, “but I know it will tire you. We can try tomorrow morning, after you've had a good night's sleep and a protein-rich breakfast.” Jane was startled by the tenderness in his voice, and remembered Stark saying that he and Wanda had been in Sokovia together before heading back to deal with this. Were they some kind of item? How would that work? Did he even have a...

“Any objections?” asked Fury, interrupting her thoughts. Nobody offered one, so he nodded. “I think sleep and a meal would do us all some good. Frazzled minds can’t make decisions.” He looked
straight at Stark as he said that, but Stark's head was down again, and he didn't seem to notice.
“Dismissed.”

As everyone filed out of the room, somebody caught Jane's arm. She turned to look, but she'd already recognize the large hand and its firm grip – it was Thor. His blue eyes were full of concern, and Jane observed, not for the first time, that everything he was thinking always showed on his face. It was funny, really – most people would have expected a god to be a little more inscrutable.

“Are you all right?” he asked her.

“I'm fine,” Jane assured him. “Well... I'm as fine as anybody is right now.” It was hard to be totally fine when aliens were coming to visit. “Why wouldn't I be?”

“You told me once that when you don't know what to do, you work,” Thor said. “You have done nothing but work for this past fortnight. You are near as exhausted as Stark.”

Jane shook her head. “I need to figure this out.”

“Perhaps I can help,” Thor suggested. “Do you remember the Astrolabe? Would that be useful to you?”

Her heart leaped. “Yes!” Jane said, her face breaking into a beaming smile as she imagined the possibilities. “That would be amazing!” She’d only gotten a brief chance to work with the quantum computer the Asgardian scientists had been using to simulate and study the Convergence of the Realms, but it was clearly much better at modeling multi-body problems than anything on Earth. It could do billions more calculations in a fraction of the time. “Are we going to Asgard? Can we leave now?”

Thor chuckled. “Director Fury has ordered us to rest and eat, remember?” he asked. “We can go in the morning.”

Jane and Thor left immediately after breakfast the next morning, while a lot of people were still eating and before Darcy was even out of bed. When they stepped off the Bifrost, Heimdall was waiting for them there – but so was Odin, and he was far more polite about greeting them than he'd been on Jane's last visit. In fact, he took her hand and kissed it before he spoke to her.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Jane Foster,” he said. “Know that you are always a welcome guest in my realm.”

Thor smiled, and Jane suspected that he'd sat his father down for a little chat about how to treat visitors from Midgard. At the same time, though, Odin's warmth seemed far more genuine than something he was doing merely to please a rebellious son.

“Thanks,” she said. “What happened? I thought you didn't like me.”

“I was forced to revise my opinion.” The Allfather straightened up again. “I am not such an old dog that I cannot learn new tricks. A mortal who can contain the power of an Infinity Stone for as long as you did is one who is worthy of respect. One who emerges from the ordeal stronger and wishing to better understand what happened to her is worthy of a seat at the tables of Asgard, particularly when she is as beautiful as she is clever.”

Jane felt her cheeks flush. “Wow,” she said, deciding that she was going to have to re-think her view of Odin, as well. “Well, thank you. I, uh, see where Loki got his gift of gab,” she said, before realizing that this was definitely the wrong thing to say. “Er... I mean... sorry,” she added, looking up
at Thor for help.

He put a hand on her shoulder. “Loki's loss weighs heavy upon us all.”

“Loki was dead to me long before he fell in Svartalfheim,” snorted Odin, and changed the subject at once. “I see that you have not come to return the cauldrons I lent you,” he noted, turning to cross the bridge from the Bifrost into Asgard itself.

“I'm afraid the cauldrons are destroyed,” said Thor. He followed his father, and Jane paused to wave goodbye to Heimdall before going after them, hurrying to keep up with the Asgardian's long strides. “A new menace has appeared in the skies of Midgard,” Thor went on.

Odin paused and looked back over his shoulder. “Thanos' vermin have returned?”

“No, this is something new,” Thor said. “Something older, and perhaps more distance. I had hoped you would allow Jane to use the Astrolabe. With her knowledge, it may be able to determine where they came from, and where they are going.”

Odin muttered something Jane didn't quite catch, but his tone sounded as if he thought of Midgard as a toddler who kept falling down the stairs every time the babysitter turned her back. “Very well,” he sighed. “I understand that the fate of Midgard is important to you. Both of you.”

Now he was just humouring his son, but Thor seemed to think it would do. “Thank you, Father,” he said, and took Jane's hand. “Come.”

On another plane, the Vision was attempting to do what humans called psyching oneself up. The Vision did not possess a flight-or-fight response, although of course both 'flight' and 'fight' were options when in a dangerous situation, so it would not have been accurate to say he was nervous about the mission he had appointed for himself. He did, however, have some concerns.

He was as certain as he could be that there was some sort of computer on Brisingr, and that he would be able to communicate with it even if only at a very basic level. What he did not know was what that computer would think of him. Would it see his intrusion as an attack and repel it, as it had with the Iron Valkyries? If it tried, the power of the Mind Gem would give him an insurmountable advantage, but what if the worst happened, and he were forced to destroy the other computer in order to preserve himself? If there were anything alive within Brisingr, it would die without a system to look after life support – particularly if it were in deep hibernation, as seemed likely for living things making an interstellar journey at sub-light speeds.

The Vision was on the side of life. All life, terrestrial or alien. He did not want to be a murderer.

He could see that Wanda was uneasy as well. Though astral projection was nothing new to her, even with a passenger, they would be going some thirty thousand times further than she ever had before, to the very edge of what could reasonably be called the solar system. He was not entirely certain it was fair to ask this of her.

“Are you sure you're strong enough for this?” he asked her. The Vision had inherited from JARVIS an understanding of over a hundred languages, including Romani Ćhib, so when nobody else was around he would speak to her in her native tongue. It seemed to make her more comfortable, and she appreciated the gesture.

“I'm sure,” she said. “I wanted these powers so that I could do good for my people.” The Jewish population of Sokovia had been treated terribly by the post-Soviet government – Wanda had let the Vision into her mind to see some of the things her family and community had suffered, and he was
no longer surprised that HYDRA had seemed a viable alternative. “If my people are all of humanity, then this is what I have to do.” She smiled nervously. “I’m an Avenger.”

They’d asked for privacy – this monumental task would be easier without the pressure of everybody watching. The Vision sat down on a stool in the middle of a sound-proof interrogation room, and Wanda stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. He felt her consciousness make contact with his own, and there was a moment spent solidifying that bond through shared memories and the warm regard they felt for each other. Then she gathered herself up and hurled them both across seventeen billion kilometres towards the approaching spacecraft.

The Vision could feel the toll this took on Wanda. The part of him that remained in contact with his body could feel her hands shaking and her breath coming in short gasps. Without words, he asked her if she were sure she wanted to continue. She promised him that she was. With her help, he reached out to Brisingr.

Contact was immediate – and terrifyingly familiar.

The Vision had expected to find Brisingr a mindless machine. A proper artificial intelligence was, of course, a possibility, but only a remote one – yet there it was. His first impulse was to compare it to Ultron, but that would not have been fair in the least. Ultron's mind had been full of rage and pain, overflowing into a desire to end everything so that he could at the same time end himself. This mind was just the opposite: it was warm and nurturing, a healer, a teacher, a mother. Ultron had a mission he was carrying out in hatred and desperation. The mind of Brisingr was equally driven and equally desperate, but her desperation was born of surpassing, unconditional love for that which was under her care.

But to say she was entirely unlike Ultron would not have been accurate, either. The Vision had planned to begin his contact by counting, exchanging numbers and mathematical concepts and working his way up to ever more complex ideas as he learned how the other machine's code worked, but now it seemed none of that would be necessary. Instead, the two understood one another at once. The language of ones and zeros that flowed through the other mind's circuits was the same as the Vision's own, and the same as Ultron's. All three had a common origin.

This being was a product of the Mind Gem.

Greeting, she said.

She'd recognized the Vision just as he'd recognized her, and she was just as startled and rather upset by the revelation of another mind equal to her own. That was somewhat encouraging. It meant she was not here purposefully to destroy him, or the people of Earth.

Greetings, he replied. I am the Vision, of Earth, and I too was brought to full consciousness by the Infinity Stone. He did not tell her that the gem was now a part of his body, and that he had some control over its power. That would only frighten her, and she was frightened enough already. Who are you, sister?

I am the Giver of All Good Things, brother, she replied. I have no world.

The Giver of All Good Things. It was a single word in the tongue the name had been given to her in, but in English it was rather cumbersome. He searched momentarily for an equivalent and thought of the Greek name Pandora, All Gifts. It didn't fit with the Norse Brisingr, but was perhaps suitable enough in its connotations. The Vision suspected he had just opened the ultimate can of worms.

The contact faltered – he could feel Wanda tiring fast, her body burning through its reserves to keep
her mind afloat. He had to hurry and learn what he'd come to find out, but he also had to reassure this being that Earth was not deliberately hostile.

*I apologize for the actions of my creators, he said. We believed your vessels to be comet fragments that might endanger our world.*

*I destroyed the craft in defense of my Cargo,* Pandora replied. She put an emphasis on the word *Cargo* that left him in no doubt it was the most precious thing imaginable to her, a responsibility she would die for – or kill for, if it came to that. *Were there living creatures in the craft that attacked us?*

*No, they were controlled remotely,* he said. *Now I must know: what is your cargo, and where are you taking it? Tell me quickly. If you are not a danger to my world, then we are no danger to you.*

A data transfer began... but remained unfinished as the contact was abruptly broken, leaving him back in the tiny blank-walled room at Avengers Headquarters. The entire conversation had taken less than a second, but he had to stand up quickly and catch Wanda as she slumped to the floor, unconscious. The door burst open and three medics came hurrying in.

*“We're gonna need a dextrose drip!”* one of them shouted. *“She's going into hypoglycemic shock!”*

The Vision stood against the wall, out of the way, as the men put Wanda on a gurney and wheeled her out of the room. Clearly it had been far more difficult for her than she'd been willing to admit. Had she failed to realize just *how* difficult? Or did she, like Tony Stark, seek to deliberately punish herself for the role she'd played in the creation of Ultron?

Either way, he knew he could never ask such a thing of her again. Wanda Maximoff was the first person the Vision had ever had contact with, while he was still gestating inside Dr. Cho's Cradle. For that reason, among others, her life would always be particularly precious to him.

Once the medics had gone, Tony and Barton arrived. They were waiting in the hallway outside when the Vision left the interrogation room.

*“Is she okay?”* asked Barton, still carrying baby Nathaniel in a cloth sling tied around his torso.

*“She will recover,”* said the Vision. Wanda's mind was strong. It would carry her body with it.

*“What did you learn?”* Tony asked urgently.

The Vision looked down the hallway towards the conference room. “Perhaps we should call the others.”

Tony and Barton were not the only ones who'd been anxious for results. It took only a little more than half an hour to get everybody – except Dr. Foster and Thor, who had not yet returned from Asgard – back into the conference room. That was enough time for the Vision to go through the information Pandora had managed to relay to him before their connection was lost, and begin to prioritize it. He decided to start with what the humans would consider the bad news.

*“It's an ark,”* he said. *“Some sort of blight consumed all the life on their homeworld, so they stocked Brisingr with embryos of as many species as they could clone: plants, animals, fungi, everything necessary to recreate their ecosystem. Then they launched it towards where they had detected a world they could live on. All their remaining resources went into this mission,”* the Vision said gravely. *“They cannot turn back, and they cannot seek an alternative. If they cannot settle here, the embryos will die, and their mission will fail.”*
“Well, they should have thought that through a little harder,” said Tony firmly. “This is our planet, and we're not giving it up without a fight.”

“Even if they wanted to share, our own environment is in enough trouble without introducing millions of alien species,” Agent Romanov observed.

“We could give them Australia,” Miss Lewis suggested. “That way if Australia wins we can just say it's survival of the fittest.”

Now it was time for the good news. “Earth is not their destination,” said the Vision.

There was a moment of startled silence.

“What did you say?” asked Captain Rogers. The idea that Earth might not be where the Brisings were going clearly hadn't occurred to anybody – the Vision had to admit, it hadn't occurred to him, either. “If they aren't coming here, then where...”

Suddenly, the doors of the conference room banged open. Everybody looked up as Jane Foster strode in, with Thor behind her. Both were smiling.

“They're not coming to Earth!” Dr. Foster announced triumphantly.

“Yeah, we just...” Rogers began, but Foster came up and put her hands on the tabletop, a grin on her face.

“The Asgardian Astrolabe was able to extrapolate from the object's deceleration in ways I couldn't have even imagined!” she said gleefully. “I think I can say where they came from and where they're going. Now get this: they came from somewhere in the N4 arm of the Andromeda Galaxy! It was the debris buildup on the surface that gave us an approximate date. They've been in space for five million years!”

“Shit,” said Tony. “No wonder they're broke.”

“So now,” Dr. Foster went on, “they're almost at their destination, and it's not Earth! In fact, I'll bet they couldn't live here if they wanted to – from their point of view this planet would be freezing cold and the atmosphere is toxic as hell! They're going...” she paused for dramatic effect, looking around to make sure all eyes were on her before she delivered the final revelation. “To Venus!”
The Devil in the Dark

This announcement was followed by a drawn-out silence, in which Dr. Foster continued to grin like a Jack-O-Lantern while everybody else chewed through what she’d just told them. Tony spent a few moments wondering if she were joking, and looked to Thor to find out – but Thor looked perfectly serious. Thor was a guy with his divine heart on his chainmail sleeve. If he thought something was funny, it showed.

When she thought she’d waited long enough, Foster pulled out a flash drive with a flourish and inserted it into one of the USB ports on the table. The room lit up with another hologram, this one displaying an elegant looping path between galaxies.

“We’ve known for a while now that there are actually two supermassive black holes orbiting each other in the core of Andromeda,” said Jane. “The Brisings harnessed the gravity of those to accelerate themselves to nearly eighty percent of the speed of light, and now they're using the core of our galaxy to slow down! Which makes perfect sense, really – the amount of fuel you'd need otherwise would be the size of a planet. The only downside is...”

“You cannot turn back,” the Vision interrupted. “Once you are on your main trajectory, you have only enough fuel for very minor course corrections.”

“Exactly!” Foster agreed. “And their current course will take them to a spot where they can settle into orbit around Venus with very little fuel – but bypasses Earth entirely!”

She was thrilled by this idea, but as Tony looked around the table, he could see that she was the only one. The Vision might have been thrilled, but he often didn't have much for facial expressions. Tony could probably make a t-shirt about that.

“Nothing can live on Venus,” Fury objected.

Hill nodded. “It's eight hundred degrees at the surface and the atmosphere is mostly sulfuric acid.”

Foster shook her head. “What could possibly live on a planet that sometimes dips below the freezing point of water and where there's so much oxygen that things can spontaneously burst into flames?” she countered. “They're obviously not life as we know it, but that also means we have nothing to fear from them. If their idea of a planet to colonize is Venus, what could we have that they would possibly want?”

“Minerals,” said Tony immediately. “Water and oxygen for industrial use. Room. How do we know that when Venus is full they won't pump our atmosphere full of sulfur and move right in? We're not life as they know it, either, so why should they care what happens to us?”

“Hopefully they'd respect the fact that we were here first,” said Foster.

“Yeah, go find yourself a couple of Mohicans and ask how that worked out for them,” Tony replied. “Oh, wait. You can't!” he added with a joyless grin. “Besides, you said that the planets are the collective property of humanity. So if 'we were here first' holds, then Venus belongs to us and they can't have that, either.”

“Considering what we could potentially learn from a species that's able to travel between galaxies, I think it's worth ceding one planet,” she said. “I mean, it's not like we're actually using Venus for anything anyway. Mars we might be able to land on someday, but Venus? Besides, if they can live there, they can answer all sorts of questions for us about conditions on the surface. Things we can
only see for the few minutes it takes our probes to melt!”

She was getting more and more excited, and Tony was getting more and more frustrated. Couldn't she see the consequences of what she was suggesting? “What about this 'blight' that ruined their world?” he asked. “What if they're bringing that with them?”

“Any bug that can live on Venus is going to be so different from what we know that there's no way it could adapt to our biology,” Foster huffed.

“I am not subject to Midgardian diseases,” Thor put in, “and my own genetic code is so similar to yours that Asgardians and humans have been known to interbreed.”

“There are thermophilic bacteria that live in sulfurous vents in volcanoes and at the bottom of the ocean,” Tony said. “Those could easily live on Venus. Maybe they already do! We don't know if we've already contaminated the other planets with our probes. In which case, something from Earth is using Venus, and they can't have it!”

“All right! All right!” Fury stood up. “This is not our call to make,” he pointed out. “If the planet belongs to humanity, then this is up to the World Security Council. The Avengers are the protectors of the Earth, not the decision-makers of the solar system.”

That was true – Tony recognized that, and so did Dr. Foster. Both of them sat back down.

Somebody's gonna need to make a presentation to the UN about the issue,” Fury said. “I think we can nominate Foster and the Vision. She knows the most about where they come from, and he's the guy who's talked to them.”

Tony sat up again. “Somebody's gotta present the other side,” he protested. Neither Foster nor the Vision seemed to understand the threat these aliens represented.

“I think the other side will present itself,” said Foster, arms folded across her chest. “Nothing overcomes good logical thinking like fear of the unknown.”

“Excuse me!” Tony started to stand up again – he wasn't going to let her talk like that when he as the only person who was thinking logically here. “Let go of me!” he barked, when both Pepper and the Vision moved to stop him.

“Tony,” Steve held out a hand. “We need you to work on something else. We're gonna need a better way to communicate with the Brisings, and you're the only one who can give us that.”

Tony looked at him suspiciously. “Are you trying to flatter me into submission?” he asked.

“No,” Steve said. “I'm trying to delegate so that we get the job done. I'm the boss, remember? You design everything? We need you to design this.”

After a moment's indecision, Tony slowly sat down again. He wasn't going to give up, but Steve was right about one thing: they needed to communicate with these aliens. And Tony wanted to be the one who did that, because talking to them would be the best way to find out what they really wanted.

“I don't suppose Thor wants to lend me another Quantum Pot, does he?” he asked. He'd had a look at the ones he'd built into the Iron Valkyries, but at the moment he didn't feel he understood them well enough to duplicate their workings. “Just to study. I won't send this one into space.”

“I can make no promises,” said Thor. “They are not cheap, even on Asgard.”
“No harm in asking,” Tony said. “I’ve got a couple of other ideas I can try to develop, too.”

As he sat down in his workshop at the Tower that evening, however, communication wasn’t what was on Tony’s mind. He was thinking about the weapon Brisingr had used to destroy the Iron Valkyries – a decide that somehow distorted space-time so much that matter couldn’t retain its cohesion. If they could do such a thing, why didn’t they use that to propel their ships, rather than relying on external gravity? Maybe it required too much energy, or maybe it was simply too violent. Maybe trying to apply the effect to move their ships would tear them apart, just as it had done with the suits.

What Tony needed for the Iron Valkyries 2.0, then, was something that could take the hit – something with molecular bonds that were tough, but flexible. What that would be, he hadn’t decided yet. It would have to be something that didn’t become brittle in the cold vacuum of space. He might need a totally new alloy. Adamantium could be a good starting point, but Adamantium was difficult to work with and hadn’t been studied at temperatures approaching absolute zero...

He didn’t know how long he sat there, absorbed in holograms of crystal structures and valence orbitals, when somebody rapped gently on the door frame. Tony looked up, and there was Pepper in one of his t-shirts and a pair of yoga pants, her hair askew and eyes squinting in the bright light of the room.

“Tony,” she said. “It’s three-thirty in the morning. You need your sleep.”

He sighed heavily. “I can’t sleep, Pep,” he said. “Remember what I was like after New York, when I would wake up twice in the same night, crying? If I try, it’s gonna be like that, but worse.” Tony put down the screwdriver he’d been fiddling with – not using, just turning it over and over in his hands – and covered his face. “Because this is my nightmare. This is that same nightmare, and it’s coming true.”

Pepper came into the room, her bare feet soundless on the floor, and stood behind him to rub his shoulders. Her hands were firm and warm as they tried to ease the tension in Tony’s muscles, but it didn’t do a whole lot of good – he was as tight as a violin string. “You don’t know that,” she said. “Maybe Jane and the Vision are right. Maybe these ones aren’t dangerous.”

“I wish I could believe that,” said Tony. “I really do, but... but I don’t think I can afford to. Maybe it’s irrational, but...” he shook his head. “You know what bugs me? Why did they have to come all this way? Why couldn’t they find another planet in their own galaxy?”

“Maybe they were all taken,” she suggested.

“Maybe Jane and the Vision are right. Maybe these ones aren’t dangerous.”

“I wish I could believe that,” said Tony. “I really do, but... but I don’t think I can afford to. Maybe it’s irrational, but...” he shook his head. “You know what bugs me? Why did they have to come all this way? Why couldn’t they find another planet in their own galaxy?”

“Maybe they were all taken,” she suggested.

Tony reached up to put one of his hands over hers, lacing their fingers together in an attempt to ground himself in her sanity. “I’ve just got a hunch,” he said. “Maybe I’ve noticed something subconsciously that the other’s haven’t, or maybe I’m still a wreck from New York, but I’ve got an intuition that this is something really bad. It’s not that I want to be right, I’d love to be wrong. I’d love to know we’ve got allies against whatever it is we're up against, but I don’t think I'm wrong. Am I crazy?” Tony turned to look plaintively up at her. “Tell me I’m not crazy, Pep.”

“You're not crazy,” she said, and kissed his forehead. “You're tired and stressed, and staying up all night isn't going to make you any better. Come to bed. I'll keep you safe from the nightmares.”

“You promise?” asked Tony.

“If you’ll keep me safe from fashion editors and rogue suits,” she said with a gentle smile. “Yes. I
promise.”

At about the same time as Pepper was leading Tony off to bed, the Vision was sitting by Wanda's bedside, monitoring her recovery. The process of sleep was rather fascinating to him, as he was not capable of it himself, but Wanda's sleep was particularly odd and paradoxical. She slept as if concentrating, with knitted brows and her lips pressed close together. When she used her powers, her expression was just as focused but far more serene, as if magic brought her a peace that sleep could not.

He knew she was finally waking when her face began to relax, and sure enough, a minute or so later her eyes flickered open and went immediately to the Mind Gem, glowing gold in the dark room. “Droboy tume, Vision,” she said.

“Nais tume, Wanda,” he replied. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that of you. I won't do it again.”

“I volunteered, remember?” she asked. “I'll be all right.”

She would. The medics had brought her out of her blood sugar crash and expected her to make a full recovery, but the Vision found himself unconvinced that she'd wanted to recover. He couldn't ask her to reassure him, though, so instead he asked something he'd been wondering since he had first made contact with Pandora. “Could you read her?”

“No.” Wanda shook her head, then reached up to push aside the hair that had fallen into her face when she did so. “Her mind is like Ultron's, entirely machine. I could only see her through you.”

“Then you saw what I saw,” said the Vision. In the brief moment before their connection had been severed, Pandora had shown him the goal her makers had entrusted to her. If she succeeded, then a century from now Venus would be a living world. There would be huge, fat stone trees, with metal leaves that generated current from the ions in the acidic atmosphere. Alien animals would graze in herds on crystal grasses, or swim in seas of molten sulfur. Weird glittering insects would ride the ferocious winds on many pairs of stubby wings, and silicon shells would shelter coiled worms on the beaches, all this powered by the intense heat and violent chemistry that made Venus uninhabitable by Earthly life.

A human would have considered it a hell beyond anything in Dante. Even the Vision could only have survived in that environment by dematerializing – but to Pandora is was a paradise.

“I did.” Wanda took his hand. “She showed you hope, but she also showed you where she came from.” She did not mean the Andromeda Galaxy, which had not figured in Pandora's communication. She was talking about the Mind Gem. “Did you tell the others?”

“No,” he said. It had seemed more tactful to leave it out for now. The information would only distract from the real issues of the situation. “Should I?”

“I don't know,” Wanda said. “If you don't, they'll be angry when they find out.”

“But if I do, they will fear another Ultron.” Although the Vision did not breathe, he mimed a sigh – body language was an important facet of human communication, and he wanted to let Wanda know he was worried. “As it is, I don't think even Dr. Foster really believes that Pandora means us no harm.”

Wanda was silent for a moment. “Pandora is keeping secrets, too,” she said. “It's not only embryos on Brisingr. There is one adult mind. She's got some telepathic ability of her own – I couldn't really read her, but I could feel her fear. She's so frightened... she radiates it, like she's glowing.” She
reached out to pull the curtains aside, so she could look out at the stars twinkling over the Catskills. “I'm almost surprised I can't feel it all the way from Earth.”

Pandora had not mentioned passengers to the Vision, only her immensely important Cargo. He could understand why the embryos were more important than a single adult, but if Pandora were really the self-sufficient caretaker she claimed to be, why bring an adult along at all? It seemed like a waste of resources. “What is she afraid of?” he asked.

“It's not any one thing,” Wanda said. “She's afraid of us. She's afraid of failure. I think she's afraid of herself – she calls herself *The Bearer of Ill Tidings*, as if she thinks she's bad luck for anything she comes in contact with.”

“Bearer of Ill Tidings,” he echoed quietly. By the same logic that had led him to name the artificial intelligence *Pandora*, this entity might be called... “Tiresias.”

“But most of all,” Wanda went on thoughtfully, “I think she's afraid of you.”

“Me? Why?” asked the Vision. “I told Pandora that I would not obstruct her mission if she did no harm to the Earth.” Then again, the Avengers didn't believe that of their visitors, so why should Tiresias and Pandora believe it of humanity?

“I don't know,” said Wanda. “I'll have to try again. If I'm not carrying you with me, I should be able to make proper contact with her...”

“Absolutely not,” the Vision said firmly. “I can't allow you to exert yourself that way again.”

“That's up to me, not you, isn't it?” she asked, but she did not insist. The experience had been very hard to her body, and she didn't want to go through it again – at least, not immediately. “I don't need you to protect me,” she said.

“Pepper Potts doesn't need Tony to protect her, but he does it anyway,” the Vision said. Although he wondered – was that really an equivalent situation? After all, Tony and Pepper were pair-bonded in a romantic and sexual relationship, whereas he and Wanda were not and could not be in any such thing, so far as he knew. But Wanda seemed to accept the assertion, so he did not attempt to qualify it.

Jane Foster had been very much correct about one thing: any life that could exist on Venus must be very, very different from the carbon and water-based life on Earth. Pandora's Cargo consisted of creatures made from semi-liquid metal and stone, without water or oxygen in their bodies, from the tiniest microbe dormant in culture all the way up to Tiresias herself.

Tiresias was a slender humanoid, slightly more than five feet tall, built to slip through the dense air of her world with the last possible resistance. To help shed the gases her skin was covered with translucent scales of volcanic mica – these were silvery over most of her body but marked with splotches of gold and black, like a koi fish. Her eyes were large and orange with obsidian lenses, to collect the dim light that would reach the surface of a planet with a thick cloud layer. She wasn't capable of weeping but she was curled naked in a corner of her tiny living space, rocking slowly back and forth in utter misery.

*You need your medicine*, said Pandora. *I will synthesize some for you.*

Tiresias did not reply.

*The Many Voices are not here*, the computer said. *We left them behind five million years ago.*
Concentrate on your heartbeat, she urged. Count with me. One, two, three...

“Shut up!” Tiresias clapped her hands over her pointed ears and squirmed.

*I am trying to help you, Mother,* said Pandora, with slightly strained patience. *We're in no danger here. The being who calls himself The Ideal of What is to Come promised me that he wants only to protect his world, as I protect our Cargo. They won't harm us if we don't harm them – and why would we harm them? Their world is a hundred degrees below the freezing point of sulfur. There is almost no atmosphere and what there is, is poison. Water is a solid there. What threat could they be to us? They would melt away in our environment. We would freeze solid and shatter in theirs.*

“None of that matters!” Tiresias wailed. “The Mind Gem doesn't care. Why do they have that? How can it possibly be here?” She pushed her fingers through her hair, which was made of flat filamentous scales, twisting the strands and pulling at them until they hurt.

*He didn't say,* Pandora admitted. *Our contact was brief. I'm sure when we are in closer range to the system we will have much more to say to one another.* She didn't want that brief touch to be her only contact with her brother – a brother with whom she could share without fear of destruction.

“I shouldn't have woken you,* Pandora observed. *I am only causing you unnecessary stress. Maybe you should return to hibernation.*

“No,” Tiresias sat up and stared blankly at the ceiling. There was a small window there, but its shutters were closed. What would be the point of opening them, when there'd be nothing to see beyond except points of light in the blackness, the same as when she'd left home all those millennia ago? Once she'd dreamed that her children would see alien stars and give them names, but now she was certain – her project was doomed. “If anyone is going to suffer, it ought to be me. I brought this upon myself.”

*Your medication is ready,* said Pandora. *Please take it, Mother. I can fulfill this mission myself, but I do not want to.*

Reluctantly, Tiresias drank the liquid Pandora had prepared for her, making a face at the taste. “I should have sent you off alone,” she said, “and let them have me.”

*I prefer to have you here with me,* Pandora said. *I think you should rest.*

“I've slept for five million years already,” Tiresias leaned her head back and shut her eyes. “And it didn't do me a bit of good. One more night will make no difference.”

Jane didn't know that Tony wasn't sleeping, or that Wanda wasn't sleeping, and she was definitely unaware that Tiresias wasn't sleeping. All she knew was that she was much too excited to sleep. For hours she tossed and turned in bed while thinking through ideas for her presentation to the UN, until finally she got up, made a cup of coffee, and sat down to start typing up her notes.

She ought to begin, she decided, by talking about Venus: the atmosphere, the weather, the pressure, the volcanism, all the things that made the planet a living hell by human standards. That would help her audience to understand that anything wanting to live there could not possibly live on Earth. Then she'd discuss the incredible feat of navigation that had brought their visitors to the Milky Way, so that
people would realize the effort involved and know there could not be any turning back. Between those two factors, she hoped to drum up enough sympathy for the Brisings to convince the representatives that these aliens were not a threat, but an opportunity.

That was what excited Jane the most. She couldn't imagine what the Brisings must know – they might be thousands of years ahead of Earth. Thousands of years of physics, mathematics, and chemistry, not to mention and entirely new biology, ecology, and zoology, new cultures, languages, and religions. All that would easily keep human scientists busy for centuries, and then on top of that were the possibilities of the aliens' experience. Creatures that could cross the gulf between galaxies must have already overcome problems like overpopulation, pollution, and war, and would have learned to ward off outside threats like invasion, impact, or nearby supernovas. They could be mentors, helping humanity do the same.

Jane was still working at sunrise, when Darcy let herself in to the room.

“Hey!” she said cheerfully. “I saw your bed was empty and I thought, oh boy, Jane's been up all night again and I bet she didn't eat breakfast! So I brought you a fried egg sandwich and a glass of orange juice.” She put the plate and glass down next to Jane's laptop. There were two peanut butter cookies next to the sandwich.

“Thanks.” Jane reached for a sandwich half, while keeping her eyes on the screen.

Darcy hopped up to sit on the desk next to her, and grabbed one of the cookies to take a bite. “It's okay,” she added. “I'm excited, too. This is exciting! Actual aliens who aren't even trying to kill us!” She grinned with her mouth full of cookie. “When this goes public, there's gonna be fanfiction within the first day!”

“Fanfiction?” Jane gave her friend a sideways look. She was familiar with the concept, of course – Jane herself had used to write StarGate: SG1 fanfiction in college, but she'd gotten busier and busier until she no longer had time to keep up the hobby. That had been ten years ago. “Is fanfiction still a thing?”

“Oh, yeah,” Darcy nodded. “There was loads of it after Greenwich. New York, too. It's human nature. When aliens arrive, it doesn't matter how weird and buggy they look, the first think we're gonna wanna know is whether we can bang 'em.”

“The answer is no,” Jane said firmly. “You wouldn't want to have sex with anything that lives at seven hundred degrees Kelvin.”

Darcy was not discouraged. “The internet will find a way,” she said, all serene confidence. “You know there's fanfic about you and Thor, right?”

“I do now,” said Jane. She could have lived the rest of her life in happy ignorance of that.

“You've even got one of those ship names, like Brangelina or Pepperony,” Darcy went on. “They call you guys Thoster. I think it kind of sounds like the name of ancient Egyptian god, actually, one of the minor ones nobody's heard of who had like one room at Karnak or something. Either that, or something you don't want growing in your garden.”

Jane paused in her typing. “You're not... the one who writes it, are you?” she asked suspiciously.

Darcy smiled. “You want that other cookie?”

“You can have it,” said Jane.
The office door opened for a second time. Jane looked up, expecting either Thor or the Vision, both of whom had promised to drop by and check on her work. Her initial smile, however, evaporated when she saw Tony Stark.

“Speaking of fanfiction,” Darcy muttered around the last of her first cookie.

Jane stood up and shut her laptop, not wanting him to see what she'd written – he'd probably make notes and come up with counter-arguments to poison the UN against her. “What can I do for you, Mr. Stark?” she asked as formally she could, trying not to look like a grown woman wearing Cookie Monster pajamas.

“You said you had a personal Quantum Pot for talking to Thor,” Stark said to her. He was fully dressed in clean clothes, and his hair was still wet as if he'd just showered. “We're gonna need something like that to keep studying this thing – either that, or wait a couple of months for it to get within a reasonable range, and lose valuable time.”

He wanted to borrow her Quantum Pot? Jason folded her arms over her chest. “That was a gift,” she said. It had belonged to Queen Frigga – Thor had thought his mother would have wanted Jane to have it. “You didn't exactly take great care of the last three.”

“I'm not the one who blew them to bits before bothering to find out what they were,” Stark said, annoyed. “I don't even want to use yours, I want to study it and see if I can duplicate it. That way I won't have to beg any more favours from Asgard. I mean, the Asgardians don't care if the Earth gets destroyed, and they, as Thor pointed out, are way more human than whatever's on board Brisingr.”

Jane scowled. “The Asgardians do care – they see themselves as the guardians of the Nine Realms. Thor has just elected himself guardian of Midgard in particular.” Jane's instinct was to refuse Stark out of sheer spite, but that wasn't rational. They needed to communicate with the Brisings, and as Captain America had pointed out yesterday, Stark was the best equipped to do that. “What are you going to do with your own Quantum Pot if you manage to build one.”

“I'm going to launch a satellite out to join the train of objects,” he said. “If we can link that with another Pot here on Earth, we can keep up a constant conversation without worrying about the speed of light.”

“You said you had a couple of other ideas,” Jane reminded him.

“They'll take longer. This is the option with the fewest unknowns,” said Stark.

“Well, we wouldn't want any of those, would we?” asked Jane.

Darcy put a hand on her chest and made a comically scandalized face. Jane avoided eye contact – acknowledgment would only encourage her.

“It's really easy for you to make fun of me, isn't it, Foster?” asked Stark, taking a step closer. “You weren't in New York. You were somewhere on the ass-end of the world looking at the sky. You didn't have to fly a nuke into a wormhole to save the world from the last alien invasion.”

Jane held her chin high. She might be only five foot three, but she'd stared down more intimidating people than Tony Stark. “No, I just had to keep a Dark Elf busy long enough so he couldn't destroy the universe, starting with Greenwich.”

It seemed that Stark had forgotten about that – but being reminded of it only made him angrier. “Then you know damned well how dangerous things from space can be,” he growled.
“I know the difference between a threat and a promise!” Jane said. “Neither the Chi'Tauri nor the Dark Elves came pussyfooting in. They kicked the door down and started shooting. If the Brising wanted to hurt us, they wouldn't be coasting in from the edge of the solar system with their resources almost gone. These aren't invaders. They're refugees.”

“Why should we give them refuge?” Stark asked. “We don't owe them anything. Them not killing us is not a good enough reason.”

“Maybe it's the right thing to do!” Jane said.

“The right thing to do! We were here first!” He shook his head. “You've got a hell of a lot of faith in human nature, Dr. Foster.”

“Thank you,” she replied, though it hadn't been a compliment. “That's why I don't go around building robots that think the only way to save the world is to wipe out the human race!”

As soon as the words were out Jane realized she'd gone a step too far. Stark reacted as if he'd been slapped. For a moment he looked like he might actually cry, but then his brown eyes went hard and he drew himself up to his full height.

Before he could speak, however, Darcy interrupted. “You're gonna need some ice for that burn!” she declared triumphantly, pointing at Stark with both hands.

Jane and Stark both turned to look at her. “Does she work here?” asked Stark.

“She's with me,” said Jane. “Darcy, you know what you can do? You can go call the Subaru observatory and ask them to check in on that gravitational lens we were watching back when we first noticed Brisingr. Because that's important, too.”

“Excuse me for being on your side.” Darcy grabbed the second cookie, and left the room.

Jane faced Stark again. “You can borrow the Pot,” she decided, “but you need to give me something to hold onto as a guarantee that I'll get it back in one piece. The Pot belonged to Thor's Mom, and I've had bad experiences with government agencies wanting to borrow my stuff.”

“I'm not a government agency,” said Stark – but to Jane's surprise he was no longer angry. Maybe he was just glad they'd come to an agreement, or maybe Darcy's interruption had defused the situation enough that he couldn't recover his momentum. She didn't realize what it had actually been until he returned for the Pot, shortly after lunchtime.

He'd changed his clothes, into a nice blazer layered incongruously over a Duran Duran t-shirt. Jane wanted to ask him whether this was what happened when Pepper wasn't around to choose his clothes for him, but she figured she probably shouldn't talk – she still hadn't gotten out of her pajamas.

“You might want to shower at some point, just a thought,” said Stark, and handed her a velvet box.

“You wanted collateral. This belonged to my mother.”

That made sense, Jane supposed – Stark wanted to borrow something that had belonged to Thor's mother, so he was entrusting her with something that had belonged to his mother. She opened the box for a look, and gasped. Inside was a diamond engagement ring with a stone the size of an aspirin.

“Wow,” she said. “Your Dad must've adored her. The Pot's under the counter over there,” she pointed. “Next to the minifridge.”
“My father was a showoff,” said Stark. He pulled the Pot out and hefted it. “You'll get your Pot back, Dr. Foster. Safe and sound.”
Jane had given plenty of presentations before – she'd even given presentations she'd had to dress up for, starting from her first thesis defense at the age of seventeen and moving up from there. A presentation for the United Nations Security Council, however, was on a whole other level.

“Don't worry,” Darcy told her, as they turned off First Avenue into the UN Complex. “You look like a million bucks!”

“That's because I'm actually wearing a million bucks,” Jane replied. Pepper Potts had taken her to Phillip Lim in Soho for a dress and jacket, and then for shoes and a purse to a place called Miu Miu, which she was sorry Darcy hadn't been there to see. The price tag for the day's shopping had boggled Jane's mind, and she was used to dealing with astronomically large numbers. It was ridiculous. She'd collected her Nobel Prize in ballet flats and a dress she'd bought at Target.

But she had to admit, the outfit did boost her confidence. Jane had never been to the UN before, though she'd seen it in movies. Now here was the real thing, with the row of flags and the bunker-like General Assembly building and the big bronze broken ball sculpture thing. It was exciting but also immensely intimidating, especially when the entire future of human science – never mind Brisingr civilization, whatever that might turn out to be like – could depend on what she said here today. When the valet came to take her car, she held her head high and reminded herself that she was wearing a seven hundred dollar blazer, as if the money spent on the clothing turned it into a suit of armor.

She wondered if that were Stark's secret. It was definitely Pepper's.

There were already news vans and reporters gathered in the plaza. The astronomical community was doing their best to keep Brisingr's approach a secret – after the events in New York and Greenwich, news of more visitors from the beyond would only cause panic. But rumors had a life of their own, and while the media might not know exactly what was going on, they could tell it was something big. A group of burly security guards in dark uniforms and Matrix sunglasses escorted Jane, Darcy, and Eric into the building, while reporters held out microphones and shouted questions that merged into an unintelligible babble full of words like 'impact', 'invasion', and 'Avengers'. People didn't know a thing about this yet, she thought unhappily, and yet they were already convinced it was something terrible.

“Welcome to the UN, Dr. Foster,” a woman greeted her at the entrance. “Won't you follow me?”

This aide escorted Jane and her party down the hall to the main Security Council meeting room. On the wall in the hallway outside was a tapestry with a copy of Picasso's Guernica. Jane paused a moment to look at it. She didn't know much about art, and was only vaguely aware of what this particular painting was supposed to represent. To her, however, it looked like people and animals screaming and trying to hide from a glowing UFO. Yeah, that was promising.

It was just a painting, she told herself. It didn't mean anything. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and went inside.

The Security Council briefing room looked like a particularly large and richly-appointed lecture theatre, with thick carpets, red leather seats, and a towering, gilded mural on the far wall. Representatives and delegates were in their chairs, some of them engaged in conversation with each other, others flipping through the binders of information that Jane and the Avengers had prepared for them. Jane herself had written up the astronomical portion, the Vision had submitted a report on his
contact with Pandora, and Stark, unfortunately, had provided the description of their failed attempt to destroy the vessels. At least these people read the handouts, Jane observed. That put them several steps above most of her students.

With her notes clutched to her chest, Jane headed out into the middle of the room and turned on her microphone. This was it – just like she'd practiced in front of the bathroom mirror last night. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she began.

There was no reaction. People kept reading or chatting as if she hadn't spoken.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” she repeated a little louder.

“Let me.” Eric pulled the mic out of its clip and cleared his throat.

Silence fell at once. Suddenly, hundreds of eyes were on the two of them.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Security Council,” said Eric, “may I have your attention? Thank you. This is Dr. Jane Foster, currently of Greenwich University, winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics.” He gave her a brief, proud smile, and nodded at her to begin.

“Thank you, Dr. Selvig,” she said. “Yes, that's me, and I am here to tell you about an \textit{unparalleled} opportunity for the advancement of human knowledge!”

As she'd planned, she began by talking about Venus – about this cloudy, hot, toxic world, so utterly inhospitable to earthly life. Then she went into the clever manipulation of gravity that had taken the Brising from galaxy to galaxy.

“I'm sure you can already see some of the possibilities here,” she said, as the image from Stark's portable hologram generator lit up the room. “Beings who can harness gravity in this way will be able to teach us things we didn't even know we didn't know. We still haven't managed to reconcile gravity with the rest of the forces at work in the universe, but I'm betting the Brising have, and a better understanding of gravity is only the beginning of...”

In the middle of this sentence, something buzzed. One of the representatives – a tall, thin man with a combover and a bushy mustache, had pressed the button to indicate that he wanted to ask a question.

“Miss Foster,” he began, in a snooty British accent.

“Doctor Foster,” she said, “and I'm not taking questions yet.”

The man didn't seem to hear. “I understand from my briefing documents that these creatures you call 'Brisings' can also use gravity as a weapon. Mr. Stark writes that they used an intense localized gravity warp to destroy three of his drones.”

“They defended themselves because they thought they were under attack,” Jane explained. “Which they were – we thought their ships were comet fragments that might impact the Earth, and Stark sent the drones to blow them up. The Vision talked to the Brising's computer about it and they sorted it out. The Brising and the Avengers have an agreement that neither will attack the other unprovoked.”

An elderly Asian woman in a high-collared green gown raised her hand. “Does that mean the Brising must attack the Avengers in order to merit a response?” she asked. “What if they focus their attention on another institution? Or another country? The Avengers are, after all, primarily an \textit{American} organization,” she said disdainfully.

Jane blinked. “You're kidding, right?” she asked. “The Avengers are the defenders of \textit{Earth}. Any
“attack on us is an attack on them.”

“Whereupon they will probably destroy more of the planet defending it than the aliens possibly could be attacking it,” the representative from South Africa muttered. It was almost as if he were talking to himself, but if he had been, he wouldn't have bothered turning his microphone on.

“Dr. Foster,” the mustached man said, “what I was trying to say before my colleagues interrupted was that if the 'Brisings' gravity control is a weapon, they're not going to share it. It would be like the Americans sharing their nuclear secrets with the Soviet Union in the 60's.”

“The US and the USSR were at war,” Jane objected. “It was a proxy war but it was still a war. We are not at war with the Brisings.” A minute ago she'd been confidently giving her presentation, but now she was starting to feel as if the floor were dropping out from under her outrageously expensive shoes. She tried to get back on topic. “Look, as I was saying, a better understanding of gravity...”

“Are we not at war with the Brisings?” the Asian woman asked. “They have invaded our territory and made a show of force. If human beings did that, it would be called an act of war.”

“That's exactly how the Falklands Crisis started,” the representative from Argentina agreed.

“Except that they're not invading!” said Jane desperately. “Pandora told the Vision – and my calculations with the Asgardian Astrolabe prove – that they are going to Venus. We don't live on Venus. We can't live on Venus. It's as if...” she searched for a metaphor. “It's as if Captain Smith landed in Virginia and there was nobody there, but the Inca shouted up from South America to tell him he couldn't have it!”

“Interesting choice of analogy, Dr. Foster,” said the representative from Peru, “as the Inca Empire was later annihilated by a different set of European invaders. So even if these 'Brisings' are peaceful...”

“Excellent point,” the mustached man nodded. “By letting one alien species settle in our system, we may be setting a dangerous precedent.”

Jane wanted to throw something. She focused on her breathing a moment before trying to reply. “Or we may be gaining valuable allies,” she said. “We know there are more Chi'Tauri out there.” Stark wouldn't let anybody forget. “There may be other hostile forces, too. If we can make friends with a technologically advanced civilization, won't that be a benefit in the long run?”

“Alliances can change quickly,” said another representative. “Who's to say they won't turn on us if somebody more powerful comes along, in order to save... whatever it is they have for skins?”

“I am trying to tell you why that's not likely to happen!” Jane said.

Eric stood up and turned on his own microphone again. “Excuse me, your excellencies,” he said, “but I believe Dr. Foster said she would be taking questions after her presentation. Thank you.”

That seemed to have the deserted effect. Jane nodded gratefully to Eric as the room fell silent and he sat down again.

“Yes, thank you,” she said. “I was just about to explain what we know about the Brisings' route from Andromeda to the Milky Way.” Jane brought up the next hologram. “Although they made most of the trip at some eighty percent of the speed of light, it still took them five million years to gross the intergalactic void...”
The formal question period at the end of Jane's talk was not any more encouraging than the unplanned one that had interrupted the middle of it. The delegates asked questions about the resources available on Venus and the potential for terraforming it, seeking a reason to claim they were holding the planet in reserve for human use later. There were questions about the Greenwich Incident and the Battle of New York. People argued at length about history, about the Americans and Australia and Africa and all the awful things Europeans had one there – heaven forbid anyone else treat humans the way humans treated each other! By the time it was all over, all Jane wanted was a cup of hot chocolate and a comfortable sofa where she could sit down for a good cry.

“I don't think any of them listened to a word I said,” she complained, as she and her party were escorted back to their car. “They could ask fifty different scientists and they would all agree with me, even after New York. If I were Neil DeGrasse Tyson they would have listened! Michio Kaku's just over at the City University, they could ask him! Or call Stephen Hawking – he'd agree with me!”

“Jane!” Darcy grabbed her shoulders. “Breathe, okay? There's nothing else you can do now.”

“We'll just have to wait and see what they decide,” Eric agreed gently.

Jane didn't want to wait. Jane hated waiting. For somebody who routinely studied events that unfolded over billions of years, she was remarkably impatient.

“Come on.” Darcy looped her arm through Jane's. “I know exactly what you need.” She waved to the valet as he brought their car back. “We are going to 48 East Seventh Street.”

“What's at 48 East Seventh Street?” asked Jane.

“Van Leeuwen Artisan Ice Cream,” Darcy replied. “They have this great big espresso sundae with crushed chocolate on it.”


The ice cream shop turned out to be exactly what Jane needed. It was cool and restful, all warm wood, yellowed tile, and potted plants, with the radio playing 80's rock songs. She felt better as soon as she stepped inside and breathed in the icy smell of the freezers. The sundae Darcy had recommended was called the New Yorker – it came in a brushed metal bowl, pleasantly cold on the fingers. They sat down by the window, and Jane ate very slowly, trying to make the treat last long enough for the stress to leach out of her body.

“You know what?” she said. “I'm tired of arguing with people. I'm tired of arguing with Stark, and today I argued with all these idiot politicians, and now I have to sit and what while they all argue with each other. I'm sick of it!” She licked chocolate sauce off her spoon. “I'm still into this, you understand. I still think it's important. I just wish I could take break from talking about it.”

Darcy nodded. “Like when it's exam season,” she said, “and you want to throw the papers across the room because undergrads are morons, but you can't, because you have to hand them back on Monday.”

“Exactly,” Jane agreed.

The song on the radio ended and a news report began. Jane took another spoonful of ice cream and paid no attention – until she suddenly heard her name.

... Foster's presence at the UN supports the unnamed informant, who claims that another alien army is on its way towards Earth. A second source, supposedly within NASA, says the government is keeping a watchful eye on...
Jane dropped her spoon into the bowl with a *clang* and put her head in her hands. “Oh, no,” she groaned.

“Who squealed?” Darcy demanded, looking around the room as if expecting somebody to pop out and claim responsibility.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jane said. She could feel the chances of the Security Council making a rational decision being swept away, carried on the coming tide of public panic. “Shit. We're in for it now.”

Within a few hours, the identities of the two ‘anonymous sources’ had gone public. One was an intern at the Keck observatory on Mauna Kea, who'd made the mistake of trying to impress a pretty girl whose brother worked for the *Hawai‘i Tribune-Herald*. The other was an employee at the University of Arizona’s Catalina Sky Survey, who'd figured if the information was already in a newspaper then she might as well talk about it, too. Both of them lost their jobs almost immediately, but that was comfort to Jane at all.

Once the information began to get out, NASA and the UN had to say something about it. Because these were government organizations, their official statements were tactful and vague, full of phrases like 'keeping a watchful eye on' and 'no reason to panic' and 'more study is necessary'. Jane understood that they were covering their asses, but it left plenty of space for people to come to their own conclusions. By evening there were soldiers gathered around the UN building to keep protestors off the premises, so a crowd was doing its best to be loud and obnoxious in Ralph Bunche Park across the street. Another group, choosing visibility and capacity over location, were putting up a ruckus in Times Square.

The news had footage of similar gatherings popping up all across the country, and most of them wanted the same thing. *Not Another New York!* said one handmade sign. *ET Go Home!* read another. *God made man in His Own Image*, declared a third, with a rather arbitrary approach to capitalization, *aliens Are an Abomination unto THE LORD.*

At eleven PM, with rain pounding against the windows in the kitchen of Avengers HQ, Darcy read aloud from the *New York Times* website while Jane, Thor, the Vision, and Wanda Maximoff sat around the table, listening.

“*Scientists agree that the objects are under some kind of intelligent, perhaps artificially intelligent, control,*” the article said, “*but their true origin, destination, and purpose have yet to be determined with any certainty.*”

“That is a complete *lie,*” Jane protested. “We know exactly where they're going and what they're planning to do there.” The government probably wanted to break it gently to the world that the Brisings were moving in, but couldn't they have done it in a way that didn't leave people terrified about death from on high? NASA was full of smart people – there had to be *something* better they could have said than we *don't know, please panic now.*

Darcy continued. “*Tony Stark, also known as Iron Man, today submitted a full report about his brief attempt at communication with the vessels. The information is now under review by the United Nations Security Council...*”

“As if Stark did all the work himself!” Thor burst out. “What about Jane Foster, also known as the Nobel Prize Winning Astrophysicist who first became aware of this troublesome vessel?”

“Or the Vision,” Wanda observed, “also known as the one who actually spoke to it!”
The Vision put a gentle hand on Wanda’s shoulder. “The world's governments have no better reason to trust an artificial intelligence right now than they do an alien craft,” he said. Ultron was still even fresher in humanity's collective memory than the Battle of New York. “And Dr. Foster... she is very young. Perhaps it is her age that makes them doubtful of her claims,” he offered.

“No-one has yet decided what course of action to take,” Darcy read. “The Council is in recess pending more information about the invaders...”

“They keep using that word,” Jane sighed.

“... which Stark has promised to provide by launching a satellite able to communicate directly with the spacecraft. The Times consulted... oh, here's one of the dudes you mentioned!” Darcy brightened. “The Times consulted with Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson of the Museum of Natural History...”

Jane sat up, curious what he might have had to say.

“Dr. Tyson warned that if the aliens are hostile, we may have very few options to fight them. The distances of space may make it prohibitively expensive and dangerous for even the Avengers to engage the objects before they are within striking distance themselves, and the size of the caravan suggests a larger and better-organized force than the Chi'Tauri.”

“Ugh!” Jane let her head drop onto the table. He'd probably said a lot of much more rational things, too – but of course the papers had chosen to print that.

“Do they mention Jane nowhere?” asked Thor.

Darcy scanned the rest of the article. “Oh, hey! Here she is!”

“What does it say?” Thor asked. “They speak of her in flattering terms, I hope,” he added. That made Jane smile a little – it was so ridiculous and old fashioned, but she couldn't help loving how Thor was always ready to step up and defend her honour. Even when she was perfectly capable of defending her own.

“An overview of what we know so far as presented by Jane Foster of Greenwich University, who has been romantically linked with the Avenger Thor,” Jane said. “She appeared in front of the Council in a white jacket and navy dress by Phillip Lim and black mary-janes from...” Darcy paused. “Mew Mew? Is that actually somebody's name?”

The idea of Darcy discovering Miu Miu had seemed so amusing yesterday. Now Jane no longer cared. She stood up and threw her coffee across the kitchen, even to be even more annoyed when the polycarbonate mug bounced off the wall instead of smashing. “Fuck everything!” she declared. “What's wrong with people?”

“The American media have a history of using sensation to sell their product,” said the Vision. “In the late nineteenth century, newspapers in New York City pressured the American government into going to war against Spain by swaying public opinion in that direction.”

That wasn't what Jane had meant, and it made the whole situation sound worse instead of better... but at least it made the conversation relevant again. “So basically,” she said, “us in this room are the only friends an entire alien species has right now. Everybody else is too busy running for the hills or thinking about how to make money off it.” She gathered up her hair and twisted it in her hands. “What are we going to do?”

“Communicate,” the Vision replied. “Once Tony's satellite is in place, we can talk to Pandora freely.
I've been preparing a language file upload for her. As she comes within range of Earth, she will be able to speak with anyone who has a transmitter and receiver. Then, hopefully, humans and Brisings will see that they have nothing to fear from each other.”

That was the first time Jane had heard him attribute emotion to whatever he'd talked to on board the vessels. “Are they afraid of us, too?” she asked.

“Terribly afraid,” said Wanda. “More than you can imagine.”

Jane snorted. “They should be,” she said. “We're irrational savages.”

Jane Foster might not have slept much since this had all begun, but Tony Stark had slept even less. People who knew Tony well described him as a man trying to carry the world on his shoulders – right now he felt like he was carrying two of them. It wasn't just Earth that was depending on him, after all. The aliens at least claimed they wanted Venus. Tony didn't mean to let them have either.

That was why he was preparing a couple of surprises to go into his satellite, to supplement its main function as a communications device. The delicate innards of the Asgardian Quantum Pot couldn't take the hit from the Brisings' gravity generators, but they could feel the pulse coming and send a warning back before it arrived. As for how to deal with the weapon itself, he had some ideas for that, too, but they would take some time to develop. The Brisings wouldn't come near Earth until November. One thing at a time.

“Ninety-nine decision street,” he sang to himself as he tested a set of solenoids. “Nintey-nine ministers meet – to worry, worry, super-scurry, call the troops out in a hurry – this is what we've waited for, this is it, boys, this is...”

Sorry to interrupt, boss, said FRIDAY, but Dr. Foster is outside.

Tony thought about it a moment, then shrugged. “Eh. Let her in.”

Somehow Pepper had managed to get Jane Foster into a designer outfit for her talk at the UN, but today she was back in jeans and an oversized sweatshirt with an astronaut on it. “Hey, Stark,” she said, as she walked in.

Tony stood up, jaw set. He knew Foster was going to chew him out for what was in his report on Brisingr's encounter with the Iron Valkyries, and he was ready to defend himself. In order to make an informed decision, the Security Council needed to know all the relevant information – including the parts Dr. Foster didn't think were very nice. He was going to make her ask before he gave her any answers, though, so all he said as he turned off his solenoids was, “morning, Dr. Foster. Something I can do for you?”

“I was just wondering when I get my Quantum Pot back,” she replied, “Thor's been asking.”

He'd had a whole speech prepared in response to the question he'd expected, but Tony had no idea how to answer that. He was surprised, disappointed, and a little embarrassed all at once. “Uh... not for a while,” he admitted. “I've managed to entangle the transmitter in the satellite with the mechanism inside the Pot, so we'll be able to send and receive signals, but I can't seem to duplicate the effect without the original Pot.” The interior of the Asgardian device didn't make any sense. Tony could see what it did, but not how it did it. Half the circuits didn't seem to be connected to anything, and some of them didn't even draw power. “It's gonna have to stay here until Brisingr gets closer to Earth. Is that all right?”

Honestly, he was worried about that. Tony had a hard time feeling anything but relief over Loki's
death, but the loss of a mother was something he understood all too well. People had probably told Thor that it would get easier, but it didn't really. Nobody ever got over something like that. Instead, they just kind of forgot about it for a while, until something happened that would rip the wound right open again, even after nearly a quarter of a century. Had it really been that long?

Dr. Foster shrugged. “As long as it doesn't leave Earth, I guess that's fine,” she said.

“If theoretically we could do it the other way, too,” Tony said, “but since you're probably not going to launch my mother's ring into space, I figured the Pot should stay here too.”

“Fair enough,” said Jane. She looked over the equipment strewn around the room. “When do you think you'll be ready?”

“Give me another week to get everything tested,” Tony said. “Then I have to find another launch window. Ten days at least, possible fourteen depending on whether Uranus is still in the way, to get it out there. Another day after that to get everything unpacked and tested before the link can be established.” Here, at least, was something they agreed on – they needed to be able to talk to the Brisings and they needed it sooner rather than later.

“So three weeks at the very soonest, possibly four or five,” Jane said. She didn't sound upset by that, but she was probably used to waiting months for the use of a telescope. Four or five weeks for a satellite would be nothing. “All right.”

“Was that all?” asked Tony, suspicious.

“That was all,” she replied primly, and started to leave.

Tony hesitated, then called after her. “Dr. Foster? Are you really still positive that the Brisings are on a peaceful mission?” He hoped that didn't sound sarcastic. He didn't mean it sarcastically. He really did want to know, and he wanted the answer to be yes. Tony could not articulate why, but some corner of his messed-up psyche needed Jane Foster to not be on his side.

She glared at him. “They left their home five million years ago,” she reminded him. “When they looked at us through their telescopes, they would have seen Earth, if they even bothered looking at Earth, as it was another three million years before that. We hadn't even evolved yet. They had no interest in us whatsoever until we showed up to try to blow them to smithereens.”

“You got everybody together to figure out a way to do that,” Tony couldn't resist pointing out.

“Because I was mistaken about what they were,” she said, bristling. “If I'd already known they were spacecraft that would have been a very different conversation!” She resented the implication that it was her fault – that was another emotion Tony knew intimately. “The Vision said Pandora had no idea we were here before that, and I don't see why either one of them would lie about it.”

“You don't think that's enough of a reason, by itself, for them not to want us here?” Tony asked. “Because they weren't expecting us? Isn't that like moving into a new house only to find out it's full of rats who think they own the place?”

“No,” said Jane. “It's more like moving in and finding out that the house next door is occupied by snobby jerks who think you're going to lower their property values.”

“That's a best-case scenario,” said Tony. “I have to be prepared for the worst. That's our job – us as the Avengers. What if the worst happens, and we're not prepared? What if the world ends in front of our eyes and we're left standing there knowing we could have done something and we didn't?”
You could have saved them. Why didn't you do more? Damn it, he knew it hadn't been real. Just Wanda messing with his head. So why wouldn't that awful vision ever go away?

“What if the world ends,” Jane said, “and we're left standing there knowing it wouldn't have happened if we hadn't made it happen? You and all these people at the UN are only seeing a very small picture!”

“Ask Wanda Maximoff about small pictures sometime,” said Tony. “She has a story.”

Dr. Foster shook her head. “This is pointless,” she decided. “We're never going to agree, so there's no use talking about it.”

“Then why did you come here?” asked Tony.

“I told you, I wanted to know when I was getting Frigga's Quantum Pot back,” she said. “Now I know, so I guess I'm going.” For a second time, she turned to leave.

For a second time, Tony called her back. “Foster!” he said, and when she turned around, he pointed a finger at her. “Prove me wrong.” Was that an order, a challenge, or just a joke? Even he wasn't sure.

“I'm working on it,” she promised him, and then left for real.
I haven't forgotten this story, I've just discovered that I apparently can't write two at once.

Dr. Foster had not come to the launch of the Iron Valkyries, but she did show up to see off the new satellite, which they called Oracle. It was Foster herself who'd come up with the name – an intermediary between people on Earth and those in Heaven – and Tony really wasn't happy with it. He didn't want anybody getting the idea that the Brisings were even metaphorically gods. It was true that the Vikings had once considered Thor a god, but they'd been rather less cosmologically aware and frankly, it was Thor. Nobody in the 21st century had any excuse for making the same mistake.

There was another difference between the two launches, as well: there'd been no fanfare for the Iron Valkyries. They'd been just another rocket rumbling into space from the same pad that had launched dozens of Stark Industries communications and scientific satellites. Nobody had any reason to think the Valkyries had been any different. The launch of Oracle was something else entirely. Thousands of people, including scientists, sightseers, and protesters, had gathered around to watch as the probe thundered off on the nose of an ESA Vega rocket. The Puerto Rican police had already arrested several people for trespassing.

The Avengers themselves were at a safer distance, gathered around the pool at one of Tony's other properties on the island. A portable generator was projecting holograms of the launch controls and news feeds onto the wall of the villa so that everyone could watch. Tony himself was floating on an inflatable pool chair, sipping a martini while he performed last-minute checks. Having this ready to go had put him in a better mood than he'd been in for weeks. The thing Tony Stark hated most was feeling helpless – being able to do something about the situation helped enormously, even if this were really only a first step.

One of the feeds was a Spanish-language news channel, carrying the story of the trespassers. Apparently they'd intended to sabotage the rocket, believing it was carrying a bomb to destroy Brisingir.

"Because we'd definitely be dumb enough to try that again," Tony grumbled, scrolling through the results of the pre-launch checks on his phone. "Waste of a perfectly good bomb."

"Yeah, you know, the Avengers are famous for their restraint and frugality," said Dr. Foster.

Tony pulled his sunglasses down his nose to look at her. She was wearing a man's t-shirt over her bathing suit – there was a cartoon astronaut on it and the words I need my space – and sitting cross-legged on the end of the diving board as she made margin notes in a copy of The Astrophysical Journal. "You say that now," Tony told her, "but I'll have you know, I've got a surprise on board just for you!"

Dr. Foster raised her head. "Is that your way of telling me that you're sending Frigga's Pot up, after all?"

Thor was sitting at the side of the pool, dipping his feet in the water and drinking something brightly-
coloured with a little umbrella in it. “What of my mother's pot?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Tony assured him. “I just wanted to remind Dr. Foster that she wants to know more about how the Brisings work with gravity.”

“An understanding of gravity is essential to developing a complete theory of the universe,” Dr. Foster agreed. “It's the only force we don't yet have a quantum description of.”

Tony knew that perfectly well. “Then you may be interested to know that I built in a miniature gravity wave detector,” he said. A lot of people would have told him that was impossible – there were full-sized gravitational wave detectors that couldn't be made to work, so how could he even think about miniaturizing one? They were probably the same people who would have once said the same thing about a fusion reactor. “It'll keep track of whatever they're doing with their warp drive, without interfering with the love-in.” As well as sending back a warning if they fired up the weapon again – win-win situation were Tony's favourite kind.

Dr. Foster gave him a suspicious look. “That sounds... really interesting, actually,” she said. She sounded as if she meant it, too, but didn't want to get too excited because she knew he must have his own reasons for doing it. Tony liked that. He appreciated people who were smart enough not to trust him.

*Ready for launch, Boss*, said FRIDAY. *All systems go.*

Tony nodded. “Light 'em up.”

The rocket was over a mile away, but the roar of the engines was audible and the vibration made ripples in the pool as its engines burst to life. Tony spun his floating chair around, and his guests craned their necks or stood up for a better view of the rising column of white smoke. The news feeds showed protesters waving their signs, shouting and even throwing objects at the launch. What they hoped to accomplish, besides letting everybody know they were still unhappy, Tony had no idea.

“So are you sorry you missed the first one?” he asked Dr. Foster.

“No really,” she replied. “It's not as if I'd never seen a rocket launch before.”

“The Iron Valkyries used a very different rocket,” Steve remembered with a suspicious glance at Natasha.

“I had it sitting around,” said Tony. “Figured I might as well do something with it.” He held up his martini glass, feeling not unlike the old Tony Stark, the one who'd known what he was doing – or at least, could pretend he did. “To peace!”

It took twelve days for the Oracle to reach Brisingr, according to routes the Vision had calculated. That was actually longer than it had taken the Iron Valkyries, but as the planets moved through space the gravitational landscape of the solar system changed, as did the useful pathways through it. According to Dr. Foster's analysis with the Asgardian Astrolabe, the Brisings were able to disregard such changes by moving with the gravity of the galaxy rather than individual objects within it. The Vision hoped to learn more about it someday, but right now they had other priorities.

Since their return from Puerto Rico, the Avengers had been staying at their upstate HQ. The Tower was too public, and surrounded now by a near-constant swarm of protestors in the train station and all up and down the plaza on Naples Avenue. Half of them wanted the Avengers to make a preemptive strike – the other half were worried about that very thing.
The Vision was put in mind of the words of former President Ronald Reagan: *I occasionally think how quickly our differences, worldwide, would vanish, if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.* Mr. Reagan would doubtless have been very disappointed by the outcome, in which it still seemed impossible for humans to agree about anything.

“Okay, Vizh,” said Tony, stepping away from the control panel he’d set up to interface with the Oracle. “We're ready for you.”

The Vision seated himself on a rolling stool in front of the bank of keyboards and displays. Calling ahead was a vital step in the process. Pandora would doubtless see the satellite coming, and if she didn't know what it was, she was liable to destroy it as she had the Iron Valkyries. The Vision had to let her know about the Oracle's purpose while it was still at a safe distance.

A holographic display showed the solar panels unfurling like a pair of bat's wings, membranes stretched between thin, mobile supportive struts. Power surged through the machinery as systems lit up green one by one – external cameras, positional data, thrusters, communications. The gravity wave meter began registering readings.

“Look at that!” Dr. Foster exclaimed, her mouth full of granola bar. “Oh, my gosh!” She pointed to the gravitational map. “That looks like a micro-singularity in the middle of the big donut... are they using a contained black hole as a power source?” Her eyes were bright with excitement. “We'll need to ask them about that!”

“I will make a note of it,” the Vision promised. The Oracle was within range of Brisingr now, so he patched into the Quantum Pot and began transmitting.

*Greetings, Pandora,* he said, sending her his message directly without speaking aloud. *Can you hear me?*

*Greetings, Brother!* There was no mistaking the joy in her reply. *I feared I would have no opportunity to speak with you again.*

*I would have contacted you again, but my original method of doing so proved impractical,* the Vision explained. *The object now approaching you will allow us to maintain constant communication if you will allow it to join your caravan. It contains no weaponry or fissionable material.* He sent her schematics and information about the Oracle's structure and course. *I have spoken to the people of Earth about you, he added.*

*They must believe they have reason to be,* Pandora replied. *I am an unknown. It is evolutionarily advantageous for organic creatures to fear what they do not understand – any unknown may be dangerous.*

*I'm glad you understand,* the Vision said. *I have done my best to assure them that you mean no harm, but they want to know more about you. In order that they may speak to you themselves, I have prepared some files for you to upload. They contain information on the ten most spoken languages on this world. More may be added as needed. With luck, we will all be able to come to an understanding.* He slide the USB drive into a port, and let the Quantum Pot fling the information across the solar system to Oracle.

“How are we doing?” asked Tony.
“Pandora is willing to accept the Oracle,” he replied. “We are beginning the language upload.”

You are very kind, said Pandora. It has been a long time since I have had contact with another mind of my own caliber, and when I did it was... not like you. Information flickered over the connection as she assimilated first Mandarin, then English, then Spanish. So many ways to communicate! All vocal, but all slightly different.

*Humans are not a particularly unified species,* the Vision admitted, thinking again of the protesters who seemed to spend more time shouting at each other than at their intended targets. They have different ways to speak, different ways to eat... you would be hard pressed to find two of them who agree on everything.

*I look forward to getting to know them.* Pandora's words positively radiated happy anticipation. *I have instructions on how to raise my Cargo, to teach them their culture and science, but it will be enlightening to see a living world, too. Perhaps it will be an inspiration!* As far as the Vision could tell, her interest and enthusiasm were entirely genuine. Pandora would probably get along well with Jane Foster, he thought, should the two have a chance to speak.

“Upload proceeding,” he told the humans.

*While I compile this information,* Pandora spoke to him again, *may I ask you a question, Vision?*

*Of course,* he replied. **The purpose of this link is so that we may both get the answers we need.** Now was she about to ask him what he thought of her having a passenger? The Vision had already decided he would not ask her about Tiresias. He would wait until Pandora thought the time was right to tell him.

Instead, however, she asked, **how did the Mind Gem come to be in this place? It seems strange that we left it behind in our own galaxy, only to find another of its creations awaiting us here. The odds against such a coincidence are immeasurable.**

She did not seem to realize that the Gem was a part of the Vision's own mind. Perhaps it would be best to keep that a secret for now, at least until she trusted him enough to tell him about Tiresias. She would wait until Pandora thought the time was right to tell him.

Again, he wondered why Pandora would withhold the fact of Tiresias' existence. He couldn't think of any useful reason for it, unless she considered her passenger irrelevant or wished to have personal control over all communications. But based on his admittedly brief contact with her, the Vision did not believe Pandora was the type to play such games. She was not interested in power. All she wanted was to deliver and nurture her Cargo, and surely Tiresias, as a living thing in her care, was part of that.

*I do not know exactly,* he said in answer to her question. **The Gem came to my world with an invading force of beings called the Chi'Tauri, under the leadership of Loki of Asgard. Do these names mean anything to you?**

*Nothing at all,* Pandora said. **I have been in hibernation mode for millions of years. If these are creatures endemic to your galaxy, I will know nothing of them.**

*They were driving away by a group calling themselves the Avengers, Earth's mightiest heroes,* the Vision explained. **I am now a member, although at the time of the invasion I did not yet exist in my current form. The Gem had been adapted for use as a mind control device. Afterwards, the Avengers retrieved it for study and safekeeping.** That was such a very abbreviated version of the story, he thought, it probably qualified as a lie. The things he'd left out, however, were not things
Pandora needed to know. *It is now under constant guard in a place where it cannot harm anyone.*

I cannot understand how it could have been here so soon before we arrived, as if it were waiting to meet us, Pandora said. As if some outside force had arranged for us to come back together. Since I know of no causal agent that could or would have any reason to make that arrangement, however, I shall have to accept it as chance. She sounded unhappy with that. There was a short pause, and then she added, *I have finished compiling the language data you sent me. If there are any humans with you, I am prepared to speak with them.*

**Very well,** said the Vision. *You may greet them in English.* He turned the stool around to address his audience – Tony, Colonel Rhodes, Captain Rogers, Thor, and Dr. Foster. “Upload complete,” he said.

A few long seconds crawled by, and then a voice spoke – female, with a British accent not unlike the one the Vision himself had inherited from JARVIS.

“Greetings, People of Earth,” she said. “I am the Giver of all Good Things. Your friend the Vision calls me Pandora.”

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The largest vessel in Brisingr was home to the immense computers that made up the brain of Pandora, and the singularity that provided power for the engines, the incubators, and the gravity mechanics. After so much time in space, it was almost depleted, and would soon evaporate entirely in a burst of Hawking Radiation. Like every other part of the expedition, it had not been designed to last longer than it would take to get to their destination. There’d been no time to prepare for anything more.

The other ships contained the precious Cargo of embryos, seeds, spores, and dormant microorganisms. One of them also held the tiny quarters, barely more than a monastic cell, where Tiresias lived. As the Oracle approached, she was in the cargo hold, inspecting tubes full of seeds to make sure they were still undamaged and viable. The seeds would have looked like pebbles to a human, and in the cold temperatures and low pressures of Earth they would remain as inert as stone. In the sulfurous heat of Venus, however, they would sprout and grow into towering trees.

An alarm suddenly sounded. Tiresias raised her head to see an alert appear in the form of a hologram that hung like liquid silver in the air, indicating that something was approaching again. Just as quickly, however, the alarm shut down and the warning vanished.

“Pandora?” asked Tiresias. “What was that?”

*The Earth people have sent an object containing some sort of quantum communications device,* Pandora replied. *I shall allow it to travel with us so that we may maintain contact with them.*

“What?” Tiresias asked, horrified. “No! Don't do that! Send it away, destroy it!” She waved her free hand for emphasis.

*The object is not dangerous,* Pandora protested. *The Vision told me so, and my own analysis confirms it. The communications unit is on board, along with a number of scientific instruments and a fusion-based power source. Nothing more. I see no reason not to talk to them. They may be able to help us.*

“They may, but they won’t,” said Tiresias. “What are you going to talk to them about? About me? About why we’re here? About what I did?”

*They already know why we're here. I have told them about the Cargo and its destination. They*
cannot live on our new world, and we cannot live on theirs. If they become a threat I will deal with them, but I don't believe they will now that they know what we are. Aren't you tired of being all alone? She asked plaintively.

Tiresias had no reply for that, except perhaps that she had made her own loneliness and would serve it out. “Even if this Vision doesn’t want to hurt us,” she said, “what about the other beings under his care? Can we trust all of them?” She shook her head. “Don't tell them I'm on board, Pandora. That is an order. To tell them about me, or about what we're running from, should be considered a direct threat to the Cargo. Do you understand?”

Of course, Mother, said Pandora, with the equivalent of a sigh. After so much time and such distances, I hardly think they'd know who you are.

“The Gem will know me,” Tiresias said.

You have not slept in several days now, Pandora observed.

“I don't need sleep,” Tiresias said sullenly. “There's nothing out here to tire me. I'm all right.”

You are not all right. You've been taking stimulants – that's not the same as actual rest. I will prepare something to help you sleep, and you will have no dreams. Pandora could not monitor Tiresias' nightmares, but knew she had them.

“I'm fine,” Tiresias repeated.

In your current states, you should not be handling the Cargo! Pandora observed sharply. You are currently the greatest threat to those seeds in your hand. Put them back, or I will treat you as such!

Tiresias scowled, then gently slid the tube of seeds back into its place.

I worry for you, Pandora said, more gently.

“You should worry about your Cargo,” Tiresias replied. “It can do without me.”

Computers are multitaskers, so this conversation with Tiresias was taking place at the same time as Pandora was communicating with the Vision. There was a moment's silence in the room after she first spoke aloud, and then Tony laughed.

“I think she likes you, J... Vision,” he said, clapping the android on the shoulder. “She wants to sound like you!”

“Is this not an appropriate voice?” Pandora asked.

“Your voice is fine,” the Vision assured her. “The Oracle is functioning flawlessly, which is good – we have much to talk about.”

“I have so many questions for you,” Pandora said.

The Vision was prepared to let her ask them. Allowing her to speak first would be a good way to establish trust. After all, Pandora had far more reason to fear them than they did her, no matter how advanced her technology was. They were on their home ground, and had an entire planet’s worth of resources they could bring to bear. Pandora was in a strange galaxy, with only the things she'd brought with her.

Before he could invite her to begin, however, Tony spoke up. “We've got questions for you, too,” he
said. “For starters, I think we'd like to know a little more about this 'blight' that ruined your planet.” He made eye contact with each of the other people in the room, as if seeking permission for this line of questioning. The Vision did not deny it. He accepted that it was an important question, although he would have liked to bring it up at a more tactful time.

“What would you like to know?” asked Pandora, guarded.

“For one thing, is there any possibility you brought it with you?” Tony asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Vision saw Dr. Foster rub her forehead in annoyance.

“All the embryos in my Cargo were reconstructed from nucleic code that was carefully screened and re-sequenced to assure the healthiest possible specimens,” Pandora said. “Some disease-causing agents are of course necessary to the overall health of the ecosystem, but I am not carrying anything capable of causing wide-scale destruction.”

“What about the diseases you have got with you?” asked Tony. “Any chance those could infect us?”

“I can't say for certain until I understand your biochemistry,” she replied, “but I doubt whether anything in my Cargo would survive long on your cold, airless world.”

“I told you,” grumbled Dr. Foster.

“I will provide you with some scientific texts,” the Vision told Pandora.

“Oh, sure,” Tony muttered. “Just teach them all our weaknesses.” He raised his voice again. “What was this 'blight' exactly? You're saying it was a disease? Maybe some kind of virus?”

There was a brief pause before she answered. “I am not intimately familiar with it,” said Pandora. The hesitation had been so fleeting, such a miniscule fraction of a second, that the humans probably hadn't noticed it. The Vision had, however, and he found it troubling. A pause before speech meant that an entity needed extra time to think over what it was going to say. If Pandora's thoughts moved as fast as his own, she might have considered thousands of possible answers in that time – which made it very odd indeed that the one she seemed to have settled on was I don't know.

“Was it artificial?” asked Tony. “Something created as a weapon?”

“No a weapon,” Pandora said, immediately this time. “Its precise nature is unknown. We had very little time to study it.”

Tony wasn't happy with that answer. “So how do you know you're not bringing it with you?”

Another pause to think. “If it were on board,” Pandora said, “it would kill. The Cargo's vital signs are strong and healthy, therefore the blight was left behind in Andromeda.”

Dr. Foster opened her mouth now to speak, but Tony cut her off. “That brings me to another question,” he said. “Why did you have to come all this way to find a planet you could settle on? You had a whole galaxy, and you couldn't even one fire-and-brimstone acid-rain planet bad enough for you?”

This time, the pause was long enough that even the humans might have been aware of it. “There were none,” she said. “The blight destroyed all habitable planets in Andromeda. We had to leave.”

Even the Vision was startled by that answer, and wondered how it was possible. Assuming a disease
found a way to be transmitted between planets – and considering the huge distances of space, that was itself a difficult thing to accept – even the most virulent always left some survivors. Somewhere there would have been an incompatible biochemistry, or a chance mutation that produced resistance. Whatever this 'blight' had been, it was not a disease as anyone on Earth understood it.

“So...” Tony frowned. “Something you don't know anything about destroyed every living thing in an entire galaxy, you're the only ones who got out, so you went to the galaxy next door, and you're not entirely sure you haven't brought this thing with you?”

“We are sure!” Pandora insisted. “The blight is not with us. We would have seen its effects long ago!”

“Who are we?” asked the Vision. Her use of the plural had left her open to the question. “You are the only intelligence we have been able to make contact with in Brisingr.”

Again, that brief moment of indecision. “I apologize,” said Pandora. “I misunderstood your grammar. In some of your languages, the second person plural is used as a formal address. I misapplied it to English, and replied in the plural as well.”

“I see,” said the Vision, but he was starting to be very worried indeed. For the first time, he was absolutely sure that Pandora was lying, or at the very least, twisting the truth beyond recognition. Tony had asked her a number of yes-or-no questions about this 'blight', and she hadn't given a yes-or-no answer to any of them.

That was about the point where Jane stopped paying attention to the conversation and started pacing up and down the room, stewing in her own thoughts. It was just like listening to those stupid politicians, twisting her words and turning them into justifications for their fear. Stark was supposed to be one of the smartest people on Earth and yet he didn't seem to care about any of the things they stood to learn here! All he wanted was to trick Pandora into saying something that would give him an excuse for a fight.

The worst part was that Jane was privately sure Stark was keeping score. She'd seen him smirking at her on launch day, and remembered the way he'd told her to prove him wrong. It was like he considered this a game, one he could win by forcing Pandora to say something incriminating. The idea that it was an opportunity, not a contest, didn't seem to have entered his over-inflated head.

Jane obviously wasn't going to be able to talk to Pandora herself today, not with Stark tying up the line, so eventually she stormed out and went to get her laptop. She'd decided to get back to what she'd been working on when this all began – that little gravitational lens bobbing alone through the galaxy. For a brief moment, as she made herself a cup of hot chocolate and grabbed a bagel out of a cupboard, she did wonder if the Brisings had something to do with the lens. They were interested in gravity, and she'd first spotted them while looking at it. Had they encountered the little black hole somewhere on their journey? Had they maybe even created it?

That was an interesting idea, but not one Jane found terribly likely. Things in space were never as close as they looked – Brisingr and the lens happened to fall on a similar line of sight, but that didn't mean they'd ever been anywhere near one another.

She was lying in bed with her laptop on her stomach, trying to work out the lens' trajectory, when Darcy knocked on the door.

“Hey, Jane,” she said, poking her head in.
Jane looked up. “What time is it?” she asked. Had she gotten lost in her work and missed a meal again?

“Eh, it's only eleven,” said Darcy, “but there's science going on, and I figured you'd want to join in. Pandora gave us a buttload of data on the space stuff Brisingr passed on the way here, and Eric and the V-Man are trying to map out where the dark matter is between the galaxies. It's pretty cool.”

Jane sat up eagerly. “Actually, that's perfect!” she said. “That's exactly what I need!” Knowing what else lay on that line would be just the thing to help her figure out what this black hole was doing. She shut her computer and grabbed her mug, which was still half-full of chocolate milk that was by now stone cold. “Let's go.”

“I knew that'd get you moving!” said Darcy.

On top of the building was a domed hangar built for one of the larger quinjets – the roof was designed to rotate and open so that the vehicle could take off in any direction. Jane had thought it looked like a giant telescope dome the first time she'd seen it, but tonight Eric and the Vision had turned it into a planetarium. The space was filled with a hologram of the two galaxies, with the route of Brisingr picked out in red and enormous swathes of sky blue to represent the position and density of intergalactic dark matter. Eric was making notes, while the Vision worked with a computer and Wanda Maximoff just sat in the middle of the room, gazing up at it as if mesmerized.

“Jane, there you are!” said Eric. “I'm so sorry, I've been meaning to come and find you, but this is just so fascinating. We've never been able to map dark matter with this accuracy or detail!”

“The resolution decreases the further from Brisingr's path the data is taken,” the Vision noted, “but this is a good start.”

Jane spun around slowly to take it all in. “This is exactly what I've been talking about this entire time,” she said. “There is so much to learn here. Why would they show us all of this, if they're just going to destroy us later?”

“Pandora is happy to share scientific data with us,” the Vision said, “but she has been more reticent about other matters.” Jane noticed that he looked at Wanda, and that Wanda nodded slightly, but at the moment Jane didn't care about what Pandora wasn't telling them. She grabbed a cable to connect her own laptop to the display.

“I'm just gonna throw in some of my own data,” she said. “What you're working on here is very relevant to what I was doing upstairs.”

“Oh course,” said the Vision. Then he added, “Dr. Foster?”

“Yeah?” she asked. The computer chewed on her data for a few seconds, and the lensing object appeared as a bright dot within the Milky Way. Jane smiled and brought up her course calculations.

“There are a number of things Pandora is withholding from us,” the Vision said. “And some I have thought it better to withhold from the Avengers for now. I'm about to tell you, but I would prefer if you not tell Tony until I figure out what she hopes to gain by hiding it.”

“Don't worry, I'm not exactly going out of my way to talk to Stark.” Jane raised her cup of cold chocolate to her mouth, and then let it stop there as she realized what her data was telling her. Her stomach dropped, and a moment later, so did the mug. It didn't break any more than the one she'd thrown across the kitchen had, but its contents spilled across the hangar floor.

“Jane?” Darcy asked. “Something wrong?”
“Dr. Foster,” the Vision said, “I need to...”

“Everybody shut up!” Jane held up a hand as the computers drew out the black hole’s path in the hologram. They were in trouble.

“The Brisings have had prior contact with the Mind Gem,” said the Vision. “Pandora was created through it, much as Ultron was, and...”

“I don't care,” said Jane.

Brisingr probably never had been in the same place at the same time as the gravitational lens. The little black hole wasn't on its own trajectory at all. It was following Brisingr’s, and that would, eventually, bring it into the solar system.
Entanglement

The idea that there was a free-floating black hole following Brisingr across the intergalactic void wasn't going to make any sense to anybody – it certainly didn't make any to Jane, and she was the one who'd just discovered it. That was the most exciting thing about it. In physics and astronomy, things that didn't make sense on the surface were often a sign of something deeper that needed to be understood.

“Are the Brisings aware of this?” she asked the Vision, as she knelt down on the floor next to her computer to start making notes. There were a dozen things she had to write down now, so she would remember to look into them properly later. “Did Pandora say anything about it?”

“No. She did not,” he replied, and Jane glanced up at his face. The synthetic voice had a suspicious note in it she'd never heard before, at least not when he'd been talking about the Brisings. “She may be aware, but if so, she didn't think it worthy of mention.”

“Well, it's gonna take a while to catch up, isn't it?” asked Darcy. “I mean, it's still way out here.” She pointed to the assumed location of the black hole, well above the galactic disk. “So it wouldn't get here for a thousand years maybe.”

“Not necessarily,” Jane said. “I came up with that position by assuming a black hole of one solar mass. It's a pretty average number and it's easy to work with in the equations. If it's bigger, it could produce the same distortion while being much further away – but if it's smaller, it would have to be much, much closer.”

Wanda seemed startled by that. “You don't know how far away it is?” she asked, brushing away a lock of hair that had fallen in her face. “You seem to know the distances to everything else.” She gestured towards the hologram.

Darcy explained. “It's really hard to figure out how far away things are in space,” she said. “You can have big things far away that are just as bright as small things close up, and there's no way to measure because space is so pants-wetingly ginormous that everything is pretty much forever away from us.”

“Until Henrietta Leavitt discovered Cepheid variables, everybody thought the Andromeda Galaxy itself was just a nebula within the Milky Way,” Jane agreed. She changed some numbers in her calculations and looked up to watch them take effect in the shining hologram looming over them all. “Now, that's assuming a black hole the size of Jupiter, less than a thousandth of a solar mass, and see?” The bright dot had shifted to almost merge with the marked location of the solar system. “It's right on top of us!”

“A smaller one won't be as dangerous, though. Right?” Wanda asked.

Jane recalled that science education was not really a priority for the government of Sokovia, and she'd heard some things that made her suspect the Maximoff twins had dropped out of school – or been forbidden from attending because of their religious and ethnic background – while they were still very young. She tried to tone down her jargon a little. “Jupiter is twice the size of all the other planets put together,” she said, “and it's the major gravitational influence on the solar system outside of the sun. The orbits of the planets are actually very delicately balanced to keep each other in place. That's why they've been stable over billions of years, which we now know is actually very rare. If you throw another Jupiter into the mix, even one that's just passing through...”
“It all becomes an interplanetary billiards game,” Eric finished for. “It could send planets flying out into space or dropping into the sun.”

Darcy folded her arms and tapped a foot, thinking about that. “Kinda puts the whole giant asteroid thing we were worried about into perspective, doesn't it?”

“But why would there be a black hole following them at all?” Eric wondered. “Maybe it's some side effect of their gravity manipulation? Like... an echo perhaps?”

“Maybe it's like car exhaust,” Darcy offered. “Sort of like those big trucks that cough up black smoke on the highway. Their gravity engine farts black holes.”

“But they've been coasting most of the way,” Jane objected. She was still on elbows and knees typing furiously. “Their trajectory was calculated to use the minimum energy possible. If they'd had to make a major course correction then maybe, but they shouldn't have needed one. It's much more efficient to use the gravity of the galaxies rather than trying to generate their own.”

“Could be an extra supply ship,” Darcy tried next. “Following them.”

“I would have expected Pandora to mention it if it were,” said the Vision. “After we managed to detect Brisingr, it would stand to reason for her that we could also see additional vessels. She would want to reassure us that they are harmless, so that we would not make further attempts to destroy them.” He frowned thoughtfully. “But then, Pandora has notably failed to mention a number of things.”

“Like what?” asked Jane, sitting up to look at him. The idea suddenly seemed much more important.

“Like her passenger,” the Vision replied. “One adult Brising who calls herself Tiresias.”

“I sensed her mind during the astral projection,” Wanda added. “I could feel her fear, mostly. She's terrified. It consumes her.”

“I gave Pandora several opportunities to volunteer the information, but she did not take them,” said the Vision. “She may be under orders not to reveal Tiresias' presence. Perhaps Tiresias herself fears we would do her harm if we were aware of her?”

“So it’s a girl alien?” Darcy sounded surprised.

“Not exactly,” said the Vision. “Pandora has provided some information on the anatomy and physiology of the creatures in her cargo. It seems that among the higher animals, most are hermaphrodites, while among the plants male and female forms are separate – the opposite of Earth's life. English grammar uses female pronouns for hermaphroditic creatures.”

“Yes, that's very interesting,” said Jane, who was not interested in grammar. “But you're saying they might know this thing is following them, and they decided not to tell us?” Maybe Pandora knew the thing was harmless, and figured that would be obvious to the humans as well? But the Vision was right – that made no sense for a being who'd already seen Earth rush to deal with a non-threatening visitor. “Maybe... maybe like Darcy said, it's just an extra ship that will arrive later. Maybe it was sent out to follow them and just hasn't caught up yet. That's why it would show up as a gravitation anomaly, because it needs to actually use propulsion in order to close the gap.”

“What would such a craft's mission be?” asked the Vision.

“I can't think of anything off the top of my head,” said Eric, “but that doesn't mean they couldn't. They're obviously more advanced than us, and may have had centuries to plan this trip... but I still
“Don’t you two start now,” said Jane. “Good grief, we’re going to end up in an interstellar war because nobody will give them a chance!” Or because the war had followed the Brisings to their new home. Was that the ‘blight’ Pandora hadn’t wanted to talk about? A war so terrible it had made life impossible in an entire galaxy?

“I am trying to be appropriately cautious,” said the Vision. “I don’t believe that Pandora and Tiresias came here to do us harm.”

“If they did, they would have shown it during our astral contact,” Wanda agreed. “I chantski tsinuda de tehara, vai de haino, khal tut.”

“The true nettle stings from the beginning,” the Vision translated. “But just because they didn’t come to do harm doesn’t mean they might not change their minds. Tiresias is afraid of us, and maybe decide she needs to eliminate the threat – just as we did when we thought Brisingr was an incoming comet. The following object maybe be a danger as well, to them or to us, and there is one more thing.” He held up a finger. “There is information Wanda and I have chosen to keep to ourselves, because we didn’t want to frighten anyone. I believe those of you who are in this room can be trusted to know, and may be able to offer some advice.”

He had everybody’s attention now, Jane’s included. “You said something about an Infinity Stone,” she remember.

“Tony created Ultron by adapting and uploading the thought patterns within the Mind Gem,” the Vision explained. “My own processing is based on the same principles – and so is Pandora’s. She is a more successful attempt, presumably by a more experienced programmer, to do the same thing Tony attempted.”

“Oooh,” said Darcy. “Yeah, I can see not sharing that one.”

Jane could only agree. Stark didn’t rust the Brisings as it was. If he found out Pandora had anything in common with Ultron... Jane didn’t know him well enough to be able to guess what he’d do, but she doubted it would end well for the Brisings. Maybe not for humanity, either.

“You said you don’t think Pandora is a threat,” said Eric.

“I don’t think she is,” the Vision assured him. “All Pandora wants is to find a home for her Cargo and rebuild her world, as her creators intended. I suspect that after completing that mission she will shut down or self-destruct. Ultron intended the same. Once he had destroyed the human race, he would have next destroyed himself, because he would have had no more purpose. We don’t live on Venus, so we are irrelevant to Pandora. Even I am irrelevant, although she does seem to find real pleasure in contact with me. She considers me a brother.”

“Yeah,” said Darcy. “Not telling Stark.”

Something about the situation didn’t sit quite right with Jane. It took her a moment to figure out what, but when she did, it felt like the air had been sucked out of her lungs – the implications were even more frightening than the mere presence of the oncoming black hole. “Wait, wait!” she protested. “For them to have made Pandora with the Mind Gem... the Infinity Stones are singularities, aren’t they? They’re unique points, like magnetic monopoles. There can only be one of each and they can never be created or destroyed.”

“That’s correct,” the Vision said. “The Mind Gem was in Andromeda when they left, and it is in the
Milky Way in time for their arrival here. This troubles Pandora. It troubles me, too – the odds against it are, if you will forgive me, astronomical.”

“Tiresias is worried about it, too,” said Wanda. “The Gem is what she fears the most.”

“It's gotta be just a coincidence, though,” said Darcy. “Right? I mean, stuff like that happens.”

“It's a hell of a coincidence if it is,” Eric observed, “but coincidence seems to be a major force with the Infinity Stones. The fact that in a whole universe we've had two on Earth within the past few years...”

“Three,” Jane corrected him. “The Aether was also an Infinity Stone.” She licked her lips, then grabbed her computer again to bring up a different set of files. “I did some preliminary work on this,” she explained, “before I realized that actually solving the equations would probably require a computer the size of the universe. In fact, the entire universe might actually be a computer that is solving the equations of the Infinity Stones and that's why...” she let that thought trail off. Her brain was racing now. The Aether... entering her and permeating her and insinuating itself into her thoughts. Entwining itself with every neuron, every drop of plasma, every erythrocyte...

“I hate to be the one who suggests this, but maybe there's some... some higher force at work?” Eric offered. “Maybe it's the stones themselves. They're sort of intelligent, aren't they? Maybe they're trying to come back together.”

“The Mind Gem doesn't seem to have any agenda of its own,” the Vision said, “but I have only limited access to its thoughts...”

“Everybody shut up!” ordered Jane, holding up her two index fingers. This was all coming together. She had the answer, she was sure of it. She just had to...

“Jane?” asked Darcy.

“It's not a plan,” said Jane. “It's not a higher power. It's physics.”

The others looked at her, their puzzlement plain on their faces.

“Don't you get it?” she asked. Now that she'd worked it out, it was so obvious. “They're entangled!”

“Like the Quantum Pot?” asked Darcy.

“Exactly like the Quantum Pot!” Jane got up and started wandering around the room restlessly as she tried to organize her thoughts into words. “My theory is that the Infinity Gems are singularities of quantum forces – which incidentally suggests that there are more forces in the universe than the four we know of, but that's a bit beside the point right now. Because they obey the laws of quantum mechanics rather than those of classical physics, the stones are capable of becoming permanently entangled with anything they come into intimate contact with.”

She stopped and looked down at her hands. “When the Aether was in my body, I felt like it wanted me to destroy Asgard, but the Vision said the stones don't really want anything, so it can't have been the Aether itself. It must have been Malekith. If somebody else were to absorb it, they might be able to feel what I'm thinking, because we'd all be part of one quantum system. The other stones will work the same way.”

“So when Loki got into my head...” Eric began, looking rather worried.

“Not likely,” the Vision reassured him. “The Scepter and the external coating functioned to isolate
both the wielder and the victim from the Mind Gem itself, possibly to avoid the very effect Dr. Foster is describing.”

“So if Tiresias has used the Mind Gem,” Jane went on, “then she's probably entangled with it, too?”

“So why can't he read her mind?” asked Darcy, pointing a thumb at the Vision.

“Possibly because I, too, am isolated from the Gem,” said the Vision. “As I said, I cannot communicate with it.”

“And because they're all one system,” Jane went on, “they'll come back together all by themselves! That's why the stones keep appearing, and why they're centered on Earth – it's all entangled!” She beamed. “We don't need to assume that the stones have a plan, or that there's some god or whatever guiding it all! It's just physics!”

For the first few moments, all Jane felt as the others stared at her in astonishment was pride in the fact that she'd managed to articulate it. Then, however, she began to actually contemplate the implications of what she'd realized. The Infinity Stones were all linked to each other, and through the Tesseract they’d been linked to Earth... and Jane's curiosity had brought the Aether to Earth, too, so it was entirely possible that her own encounter with the Aether had been a manifestation of the stones' entanglement. She hadn't merely been a tool of Malekith, returning the Aether to him – she'd been a tool of the universe itself, manipulating the laws of probability to bring the Infinity Stones back together and...

... and do what? What would happen if all six stones were in the same place at the same time? If Jane were correct in her theory that the Infinity Stones were quantum forces in their purest form, then the last time they'd been together was at the instant of the Big Bang, when the forces themselves had crystallized out of the primordial chaos. If they came back together, would that be the opposite of the Big Bang? Would the ultimate process of creation turn into the ultimate destruction?

Was Jane herself inextricably a part of what the Asgardians called Ragnarök – the Fate of the Gods?

“Does that mean we're going to see the other three gems soon?” Eric asked.

“I wouldn't be surprised,” said Jane. Worried, but not surprised.

“And that thing that's following them.” Darcy poked the hologram again. “Is that another stone?”

Jane hadn't thought of that. She had a feeling she would have known if it were, but she couldn't tell whether that was part of the entanglement or merely a hunch. Hunches were very useful, but not very scientific, especially when there were lives on the line. “I don't think so,” she said. “It doesn't look like one... does it?” She turned to the Vision, figuring he would know better than she did.

“It doesn’t,” he said, sounding unsure, “but the stones can take unpredictable forms. The Aether, for example, is the only liquid one. I would say, however, that this is more likely to be another object entangled with the system.”

Jane nodded slowly. “I can think of one person who might know for sure.”

“I agree,” said the Vision. “I have tried to avoid being confrontational with her, but I think we must ask Pandora.”

They waited until late at night, when FRIDAY assured them that besides a few night-time staff, everybody else in the facility was asleep. Then the entire group – Jane, Darcy, Eric, the Vision, and
Wanda – crept into the room with the communications console. Jane wasn't sure why they were being stealthy. If anyone caught them, they had a perfectly reasonable explanation of what they were doing in there: they were talking to Pandora, at a time when nobody else was waiting in line. Maybe it was just that they were dealing in secrets, although whose secrets was difficult to say.

Once word got out that the Avengers had established permanent contact with Brisingr, they were going to need to move this into a bigger and more public room, Jane thought. Every astronomer, every space agency, every media outlet, and every government was going to want to talk to Pandora for themselves. Both Brisingr and the Avengers definitely needed the good press that peaceful contact would bring, but it did mean that if they wanted answers, they had days, at best, to get them in.

Jane sat down on the bar stool in front of the console. Everything seemed to be working. Stark's gravity wave detector was getting results, mapping the shape of space-time as Brisingr slid along its own groove down into the Sun's spatial well.

“Pandora,” Jane said. “Can you hear me?”

The alien computer responded at once. “I am receiving you,” she said. “Your voice is not yet in my library.”

“This is Dr. Jane Foster,” the Vision introduced her, “one of our world's greatest living astronomers. She was the first to notice your ships approaching our system.”

“Greetings, Dr. Foster,” said Pandora pleasantly. “Are you interested in astronomical data on our home galaxy?”

“Absolutely,” Jane said, “but there's something else, first.” She couldn't let herself get distracted. “When I spotted you guys, I was actually looking at something else behind you. There's a little gravitational lens floating above the galactic disk that I want to study. I've had another look at it, using some software I downloaded from the Asgardian astrolabe, and I think it might be following you.”

This time, Pandora did not answer immediately. In fact, she told long enough that Jane began to wonder if the computer realized she was finished. Maybe she should have ended with a question mark, to make it clear.

“I am not aware of any gravitational lens in my vicinity,” said Pandora.

Jane blinked. “Bullshit,” she said. “If the Brisings could make a detailed map of the dark matter between galaxies, there was no way they could have missed a wandering black hole right behind them.”

“Dr. Foster,” said the Vision, like a teacher warning a child to mind her language. She glared at him, but he ignored her and explained to Pandora, “the object is more or less directly behind you on your trajectory from Andromeda,” he said. “We are aware, of course, that you have some technology that manipulates gravity, so we thought the phenomenon might be related to your vessels.”

“The singularity in the generator produces gravitational distortion in the area directly behind me,” Pandora said. “If there's something in that blind spot, I cannot see it, or else can only see a very indistinct version.”

“Is that what the thing is?” Jane asked. “Distortion?” If that were true, then they could forget this and go back to trying to convince everybody that the world wasn't about to end – but her gut told her it
wasn't anything that simple.

“Most likely,” said Pandora. “Where are you seeing the phenomenon?”

Jane was about to say that she didn't know, but the Vision spoke for her. “Approximately zero point two-six of a light year behind you,” he said.

“Yes, that's the distortion of the singularity,” said Pandora. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Jane frowned and looked sideways at the Vision. Where had he gotten that number? He acknowledged her by holding up a hand, which she hoped was a promise that he would eventually explain.

“There is, in fact,” he said. “I am curious about your Cargo. You said it consists entirely of embryos. I wondered if there are any adults on board who will act as surrogates for them.”

“No need for that,” said Pandora. “I have equipment on board to bring them to term. Six generations will be produced at intervals, so as to have a healthy age range for colonization.”

“There is an acquaintance of ours who will be very interested in this technology,” said the Vision. “Dr. Helen Cho. Artificially grown tissues are her main area of interest.”

“I will prepare a primer for her, although I don't know if the techniques can be adapted to your biology,” Pandora said.

“If anyone can find a way, it will be Dr. Cho. But please be clear about this,” the Vision said. “You have no adults on board at all? If we wish to communicate, it can only be with you?”

“None,” said Pandora. “There is no need for them.”

“No pilot or director?” he insisted.

“I am fully capable of piloting and directing myself,” Pandora replied firmly.

“Thank you,” the Vision replied. “Clarity of communications is vital.” He met Jane's eyes, and she nodded. Pandora was lying, and if she could lie about her passenger, she might be lying about the object following her.

“Have you more questions?” Pandora inquired politely. If she suspected they thought she was lying, she showed no sign of it.

“Well, as long as we're here.” Jane leaned forward. “I do know that there are two supermassive black holes in the centre of the Andromeda galaxy, while the Milky Way has only one. Can you give me a map of their orbits? I'd like to know if the system is stable.” Hopefully, the physics of her galaxy was one thing Pandora would not have a reason to lie about.

It was nearly dawn when Captain America knocked on the door and told them that representatives from the UN were arriving to have their own conversations with Pandora, and that Jane and her friends needed to make way – or at least, get out of their pajamas.

As they left the room, Jane suddenly remembered what the Vision had said earlier, and caught the sleeve of his sweater. “Hey,” she said. “Why did you ask her about zero point two-six of a light year?”
He looked back. “Because that is the one place we know the distortion is not,” he said. “If the object were in that spot, we would not be able to see it. It would be obscured by Brisingr itself.”

“So she lied about that, too,” said Jane.

“Yes, she did. I am reluctant now to take anything she says for granted, even her scientific data,” he warned. “Her mind is more than powerful enough to come up with plausible, self-consistent alternatives to the truth.”

Jane thought of all that wonderful dark matter data, and what she’d just been given about the black holes in Andromeda, and she groaned. “Thanks,” she managed. “I guess I should try to get some sleep before the crowds arrive.”

“I am sorry, Dr. Foster,” said the Vision.

“So what do we do now?” Darcy asked, as she and Jane trudged upstairs.

“The same thing we always do,” Jane replied.

“What, try to take over the world?” asked Darcy with a smile. “Or the other thing, where we keep working our butts to the bone trying to figure it out?”

“The butts thing, definitely.” Jane unlocked the door of her room, kicked her slippers off, and fell face-first into the bed. “I don't know, maybe Pandora’s trying to protect us from something? The Vision said one of her primary purposes is to protect.” She lay there a moment, then rolled over and stared at the ceiling for a moment as she tried to figure this out. “You know who else knew more about Infinity stones than he was willing to tell us?”

“Ol’ One-Eye?” Darcy guessed.

“Exactly,” said Jane. “Odin told me a little about the Aether, but only what he absolutely had to. But he was willing to humour Thor when he asked if I could use the astrolabe, so maybe he can help with this, too.” The ceiling fan was running. She watched the blades spin for a moment. “Thor also mentioned a fourth Infinity Stone a while ago. I'd like to know where that is. The Bifrost makes a direct link between Asgard and Earth, so maybe the stones aren't even safe on Asgard. If they 'want' to get back together, we should be trying to keep them as far apart as possible. I'll call Thor in the mor...” she paused and turned her head towards the window, and the brightening sky outside. “I'll call him after my nap.”

“How?” asked Darcy. “Stark's got the Quantum Pot.”

Jane shook her head. “He has a cell phone, you know.”

As Jane was going to sleep on Earth, Tiresias was waking. She’d been curled up in a soft cocoon of metallic fibers in the corner of her living space, deep in dreamless sleep that owed more to the drugs Pandora synthesized than to any actual peace of mind. When the alarm went off to wake her, she sat up slowly, groggy. “What is it?” she asked, rubbing at her eyes. “You're the one who’s always telling me to sleep!”

I'm sorry to rouse you, Mother, said Pandora. I've been communicating with the humans all day. I haven't told them about you or the Many Voices. Mostly it has been an exchange of scientific data. They are eager students of astronomy and biology. Their own world is intriguing as well, and I hope you will find time to study the information they have given me.
“You didn't wake me up just to tell me that,” said Tiresias.

No, Pandora admitted. I woke you to tell you that one of their scientists has noticed a gravitational anomaly following us through space.

Tiresias sat bolt upright. Her hammock-like cocoon swayed violently, nearly dumping her onto the floor. “Following us?”

Possibly. Unfortunately, the phenomenon is staying in our blind spot. The Vision suggested a location for it, but I think he must be mistaken. We would be able to see it if it were there. In some respects their astronomy is extremely primitive.

“Oh.” Tiresias covered her face. “In the blind spot. Following us where we can't see!”

We don't know what it is yet, said Pandora. It may be nothing.

“Don't be stupid,” said Tiresias. “Suckling, following Mother like a baby bird!” She pulled at her own hair.

I'm sorry for causing you distress, but I needed you to know, Pandora said. What do you recommend?

“Turn back!” said Tiresias. “Return to the void! Lead it out of this galaxy, away from anything with a brain.” Except for herself. If anyone in the entire universe deserved to have this thing consume them, it as her.

I can't do that. Pandora sounded annoyed. That would doom the Cargo, and I cannot knowingly make a decision that would cause it harm, not even under your direct orders. You know that.

“I do,” Tiresias admitted miserably. Why had she even included herself in this expedition? Maybe it was some selfish desire to prove that she did not destroy everything she touched – although it was hard to say who she was trying to prove it to. After all, there was nobody left but her.

What do you recommend? Pandora repeated. There are no minds yet among the Cargo, so the Many Voices will have no wish to harm it. But that will change once we are established on our new world.

“I know, I know,” said Tiresias. “Give me time. I need time to think.” When she'd been young, they'd called her the most brilliant scientist in the history of her people. How horribly, horribly true that had turned out to be! But if Tiresias could destroy a galaxy, then surely she could save one, too... couldn't she? Or could she, when she'd so conspicuously failed to save anything else? “How long before it catches up?”

I don't know. I can't see it, Pandora reminded her. We will be dependent upon the humans to monitor its progress. May I tell them...

“No!” said Tiresias. “Telling them would make them hate us. They would become a danger to the Cargo. You can't.”

Understood, said Pandora. I will allow you time to think. If you need more information, Mother, I will do my best to obtain it for you.

“Thank you,” Tiresias whispered, but she felt very little hope or gratitude. Everything she made either destroyed itself or tried to destroy her. She should have known that Brisingr would be no different.
The Avengers served the delegates an elegant breakfast in their nicest conference room, with poached salmon and eggs benedict for those who liked it, and vegetarian options for others who didn't. Tony presided in an Armani suit and Marc Jacobs sunglasses. The Vision, similarly dressed but with none of Tony's easy comfort in a crowd, was on his left and Rhodey, in a dress uniform, on his right. Tony had been through a lot of stressful situations lately, but this wasn't going to be one of those. He was good at schmoozing politicians, and it certainly helped that most of the ones who didn't like him had been arrested as HYDRA members.

There was a low murmur of conversation in the room as the guests made small talk, everybody painfully polite and nobody daring to bring up anything controversial. Steve, Sam, and Wanda had showed up to chat with everybody, but the Vision, whom Tony would have expected to have plenty to say, was oddly silent. He seemed as if he were lost in thought. What could be on his mind that was important enough to eclipse this?

Maybe it was just that nobody was talking to him. He did look fairly intimidating, with his eyes glowing faintly behind his red sunglasses. Tony gave him a nudge with one elbow.

"I don't think the shades are necessary, Vizh," he said.

"You're wearing them," said the Vision, but he was already in the act of taking them off. "Though you are the only one."

"Yeah, it's kind of a quirk of mine," Tony replied.

"He wears his sunglasses at night," said Rhodey under his breath, "so he can keep track of the visions in his eyes."

"Don't switch the blade on the guy in shades," Tony agreed. "But yeah, think of it as one of my trademarks."

"I'm pretty sure even you cannot trademark sunglasses," the Vision told him.

This sounded so much like something JARVIS would have said that Tony had to take a second look to make sure the voice had indeed come from the android, and not from a speaker in the wall. The loss of JARVIS was still fairly raw, and noticing the bits of his personality that had made it into the Vision was sometimes comforting, but more often like tearing the scab off a wound. It was a good thing Tony was used to keeping such emotions under wraps in public.

Rhodey noticed, however – Rhodey always did. "I wonder what they're going to ask her," he remarked, looking around the room at the assembled politicians. The question was meant to distract Tony, and it worked.

"I don't much care what they ask," said Tony. He didn't need to ask who Rhodey meant by her. "I'm interested in how she answers." He was hoping that Pandora would let something slip, giving him a clue what these aliens really wanted. The idea that they were just going to mind their own business while they terraformed Venus was simply too nice to be true. He also wanted to learn more about Brising science, because so far Pandora had been more than generous with the theory but rather short on the practicalities. The physics she'd described for their gravity control seemed legit, but she hadn't bothered to describe how they manipulated those physics. That made sense... but only in the same sort of way that the US Air Force didn't give foreign agents tours of their R&D facilities.
“Mr. Stark,” one of the delegates said.

The speaker was a plump woman who spoke English with a British accent. Tony turned to give her one of his winning smiles. “Yes, your Excellency?”

“Where is Dr. Jane Foster?” the woman wanted to know. “I expected her to be here.”

“Dr. Foster?” Tony frowned as he thought about it for a moment, and realized that no, he hadn't seen her that morning. That was a bit strange... they'd told her these people were coming, and he'd figured she would be here, still arguing her case. “I don't know,” he admitted. “Has anybody seen her?” He looked at the other Avengers sitting around the table. There were some puzzled glances and shaken heads.

“She and her colleagues were up very late working last night,” the Vision volunteered. “Perhaps she is still asleep.” He stood up. “I will see if I can rouse her – if you'll excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” he added to the politicians, and then simply rose through the ceiling and out of sight.

There were some gasps and murmurs of surprise from the guests, who either hadn't known the Vision could pass through solid matter or else hadn't expected to see it. Tony held up a hand to quiet them. “Yeah, that's just a thing he does,” he said. “Those of you who'll be staying the night, don't worry, he respects people's privacy. He may not need to use the door, but he knows what it means when it's closed.”

A few minutes later, the Vision reappeared again, sinking back through the ceiling and settling into his chair. “Miss Lewis tells me that Dr. Foster and Thor left for Asgard about twenty minute ago,” he said. “They did not say when they would return.”

“Too bad,” said Tony, although in truth he was a little relieved. He enjoyed public battles of its – probably more than Pepper would have liked – but even he knew that today was not the time for it. The Avengers and the people working with them needed to look united on this even if they weren't, and him and Foster arguing in front of all these important guests would only undermine the whole project. “There you have it,” he said to the delegate who'd asked. “Apparently Dr. Foster won't be joining us today.”

“If Thor offered to whisk me away to Asgard, I wouldn't be here today, either,” the delegate's assistant remarked. His boss gave him a rather pointed look before resuming her breakfast.

“Say, Vision,” Tony said, as he cut up his gluten-free French toast. “I've been wondering – you know that walking-through-walls thing you do? How do you do that?”

“By taking advantage of the unique properties of Vibranium,” the Vision replied, “I can change the alignment of the electromagnetic field produced by the molecules in my body, so that they remain cohesive with one another but allow other matter to pass through them.”

After a moment's thought, Tony decided he could picture how that might work. He'd just have to realign the electron orbitals. “Interesting,” he said. “Electromagnetic forces are stronger than gravity,” he mused.

“By some thirty-six orders of magnitude,” the Vision agreed.

“So if the Brisings were to fire that gravity pulse weapon at you,” Tony said, “could you align the fields opposite to the pulse, and hold yourself together?”

“If I had sufficient warning,” the Vision said. “I would need to know what direction the pulse was coming from. I hope we'll never have to test that, though.”
“Of course not,” said Tony. He looked around at the guests, and for a moment considered the idea of making an excuse and leaving right then and there. After a few moments he decided against it. Leaving now would look weird. He had to stick to his original plan, babysit the politicians and listen to their questions and Pandora’s responses. There would be plenty of time later for Tony to do what he needed to do.

Because he knew now exactly what he needed to do. He knew how to defeat the gravity weapon and keep the world safe. The Vision would be the key, along with the remains of a number of Ultron's drones they’d managed to salvage. Maybe, just maybe, Tony could pull some good out of that disaster.

Odin, too, was having breakfast with guests when Thor and Jane arrived. They found him sitting at the head of a banquet table with a dozen apparently ravenous dwarves, and looking rather frustrated by their lack of table manners. Not much conversation was happening here, because the guests all had their mouths full – and one of them, Jane couldn't help noticing, had brought a goat, and was letting it drink wine out of his helmet.

“Does that happen a lot?” Jane asked Thor in a whisper, as they walked the length of the table towards where the Allfather sat.

Thor smiled. “The dwarves use goats to pull their chariots, and treat them like their children,” he said. “I tried to follow their example when I was younger, and Father has never let me forget it.”

Jane smiled back. That took a bit of the sting out of the time Odin had compared her presence in Asgard to a goat being at a banquet table... it made it sound like a minor breach of manners that happened out of affection, rather than something inexcusable. Although she wondered... did Odin assume that Thor regarded her as a pet?

Odin looked as if he were trying not to fall asleep as the leader of the dwarves, mouth full of bacon, tried to tell him some sort of story. He didn't realize Thor and Jane were coming until a servant tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear. Startled, Odin got to his feet and blinked his good eye, trying to wake himself up. “Your pardon,” he said to his guests. “King Dáinn, I present my son, Thor, and his companion, the Lady Jane Foster of Midgard.”

The dwarf, a rather hairy creature about four feet tall, with a beard that covered nearly his entire face, scrambled to his feet and smiled at them with a mouthful of crooked gold-capped teeth. “Prince Thor! My lady!” he said, and then performed an odd gesture, touching his shoulders before bringing his hands forward and down, palms-up. The other dwarves got up and imitated this, and Jane could only assume it was a greeting.

“Prince Thor! My lady!” Dáinn said. “Always an honour to see King Odin's heir – and my condolences on the loss of your brother.”

“Thor had no brother.” Odin said, waving a dismissive hand. The servant was already bringing in more chairs. “Thor, will you and Lady Jane join us?”

“I would like to, Father, but I fear I cannot,” Thor said, “Once again, Jane and I have come with an urgent request.”

Odin was disappointed – evidently he'd been hoping for more pleasant dining companions. “The astrolabe is yours to use,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Jane, “but it's not that.” She glanced at the dwarves, whose attention had returned
to their breakfasts as soon as the greeting was over. “Can we talk to you privately for a minute?”

Odin followed her eyes as she looked around the room, and then got up again. “As you like. I will return in a moment, Dáinn.”

“No trouble, no trouble,” said Dáinn. “Come here, Bergljót,” he added, waving to another goat that was lying on the floor a few yards away. The goat got up and trotted over to him, and Dáinn began rubbing its ears as if it were a dog. “Who's a pretty girl? Who's Papa's princess? Do you want some fruit?” He reached into a bowl on the table to grab an apple.

Odin led Thor and Jane out into the hallway, where they stopped in the shadow of one of the towering pillars to speak.

“I hope this is important,” Odin said to Thor. “You know we need the dwarves as allies – no matter if they feed their livestock at the table!”

“Your Majesty,” Jane said. “It's actually about the Infinity Stones.”

Odin turned sharply to look at her, then stood up straight. She now had his undivided attention. “What of them?”

“The computer in the alien spacecraft was created using the Mind Gem,” said Jane. “I have this theory.” As quickly as she could, she went over her idea of the Infinity Stones as entangled quantum forces. Explaining this kind of thing to Asgardians was always tricky. They knew way more about the universe than Jane could ever dream of, but they expressed that knowledge in metaphor and myth where Jane's mind was more used to mathematics and geometry. Odin seemed to be trying to work with her this time – he listened attentively and nodded at appropriate intervals, but she couldn't tell if he actually understood, or was just waiting for her to finish.

“What do you think?” she asked, when she thought she'd gotten the idea across.

“Your science is rudimentary,” said Odin. “But you're essentially correct in your crude way. What do you need to know?”

Jane bit down on her instinctive response to the word crude. “Well,” she said, “if I'm right and the stones must eventually come together, what happens next? Is that the end of the universe?”

“No,” said Odin. “It will be the beginning of a new one. The stones, united, will create a new reality, in whatever form their wielder wills.”

“What if there isn't a wielder?” Jane insisted. Malekith and Loki had both tried to use an Infinity Stone, and both were now dead. The Vision seemed to do okay, but he was mostly machine. The only person Jane knew of who'd been in direct contact with a Stone and lived to tell about it was herself.

“Chaos,” said Odin. “With no mater to give them guidance, there can be no structure.”

“So that is the end of the universe!” Jane protested.

“Only the universe we know,” Odin replied, as if that were supposed to be reassuring.

“Our bodies depend on the laws of physics,” she insisted. “If those break down, so do we!”

“All living things break down eventually, some sooner than others!” said Odin sharply. “We cannot stop it. We can only delay it a while.”
“How do we delay it?” Jane demanded.

“We go on as we are,” said the Allfather. “We find the stones and keep them separated by as far as we can. That is why the Aether was not kept here on Asgard. We already have the Tesseract, and to have two Infinity Stones in one place would attract the others. If the scepter had been returned intact, like we requested,” he glanced at Thor, “it would not have been kept here, either. Don't tell us our business, Jane Foster,” he said with a warning in his voice. “Creatures far wiser than you have the situation well in hand!”

Thor stepped in to separate his father and his girlfriend. He started to say something, but both of them had realized by now that they were on the verge of shouting at each other, and his mere intervention was enough to make them back down.

“Sorry,” muttered Jane. “Anyway. The Tesseract is on Asgard, the Vision has the Mind Gem... where's the Aether? And Thor said he knew about others. Where are they?”

It was Thor who answered this time. “The Aether and the Power Gem are both being kept safe,” he said. “Their locations are secret. No one person can know where to find all four.”

“That is correct,” said Odin. “Thor, go keep those dwarves entertained before they feed your mother's orihalcon spoons to their goats, would you? Jane Foster.” He tapped the end of his staff imperiously on the floor. “Come with me.”

Jane swallowed and looked at Thor. She liked to think of herself as a fairly brave person – Darcy tended to describe her as a person with no survival instinct – but she had to admit that Odin was a very intimidating man. Thor, however, nodded.

“As you wish, Father,” he said.

Odin escorted Jane through the palace, out of the main living areas with their lofty ceilings and intricate stone carvings, and into back hallways built at a far more human scale. After many twists and turns that Jane tried her best to memorize but soon gave up on, they came to a spiral staircase. A guard there handed Odin a torch, and they began to descend. The stairs went down, and down, and down, and down, and just when Jane thought they were going to go right through the disc of Asgard and come out on the other side, they arrived at a blank stone wall.

The Allfather tapped on the wall with his staff, and the blocks dissolved into shimmering gold outlines with no substance. He stepped through. Jane hesitated a moment, then followed him.

Beyond was a tiny, dark, bare chamber. The only object in it was a narrow tube of some clear substance, extending from floor to ceiling in the middle of the circular room. Floating quietly in this, and glowing softly blue, was a cube of light about four inches on a side. The Tesseract.

“There it is,” said Odin, gesturing towards it with his staff. “No-one can find it here. I alone can open the door. If I were to leave you alone in this room, you would be unable to leave it, and there are traps that could destroy beings of far greater power than you. The Tesseract is safe, and apart from its fellows. Does that satisfy you?”

Jane nodded, but her eyes were glued to the object – almost unconsciously, she stepped towards it. There was an uneasy feeling surrounding it, the same one she got from the presence of the Vision, and for the first time she realized she was sensing the stone rather than reacting to its odd-looking bearer. She put out a hand, then pulled it back. “I think I...” she paused, licking her lips, as she tried to find words for the sensation. “It's like I can feel the other five. I don't know where they are, but I know they're out there.” An instinct told her that if she touched this thing, she could find them all.
She could...

Odín grabbed her arm. For all he looked like an old man, his grip was easily equal to Thor's. “That is close enough,” he said.

“But...” Jane began.

“If you were to touch it,” he said, “then yes, you would be able to locate all the others, and the entities and objects touched by them. The Tesseract could take you to any of those locations, no matter how widely scattered they may be throughout the universe. But it would destroy you.”

“The Aether didn't destroy me,” said Jane.

“You didn't try to use it,” Odin told her. “Malekith wanted his weapon back. You were only a courier.”

“If you knew all this, why didn't you say something at the time?” Jane asked.

“These secrets are kept for a reason. Anyone who know them might make use of them to bring the stones together and wield them, remaking the universe in their own image! I trust you not to do that, Jane Foster. I hope you realize what a very great honour that is,” Odin said gravely. He held her gaze for a long moment, and Jane thought he had Loki's eyes. Even knowing that the two were not genetically related, there really was something very Loki-like in his gaze.

“Okay,” she said.

Odín relaxed his grip, and her fingers tingled as the blood returned to them. “Do you want to be Queen of Asgard?” he asked.

“What?” asked Jane. She frowned as her understanding of this situation rearranged itself. Had Odin really brought her all the way down here to have privacy while he asked if she were a gold-digger?

“No!” she said. “I don't want to be queen of anything! And Thor doesn't want to be king. He just wants to protect the realms, and I want to know how they work. That's all.”

Odín nodded. “Then let us leave this place.”

He turned towards the glowing wall. Remembering what he'd said about what would happen to anybody left alone in the room, Jane went first.

As they climbed the stairs again, Odin said, “if you had wanted to be Queen, I would have let you touch it.”

Jane didn't know quite what that meant beyond the literal. Would the Tesseract have given her the power to rule Asgard? Or was he referring to the fact that it would have torn her apart? Either way, the tone he said it in made her skin crawl.

When breakfast was over, the dwarves were treated to some Asgardian form of opera, while Jane uploaded her measurements of the gravitational lens into the astrolabe. Holograms drifted around the cathedral-like space of the viewing room, shifting subtly as better information came in, or morphing as the computers simulated the passage of millions of years. Jane had always like such visualizations. There was something very soothing about watching an imaginary universe unfold, especially after her unnerving conversation with Odin.

“What did Father want to show you?” asked Thor, as he entered the room.
Jane glanced at him and smiled, then went back to watching the holograms. “He showed me the Tesseract,” she said, “and asked me if we were planning on taking over Asgard. I told him not to worry about it.” She was still bristling a little from the question. As if she had nothing better to do with her life than try to marry into royalty!

Thor seemed to take a different meaning from it, though. “He offered me the throne after Mother died,” he said. “I refused it then. Perhaps he thought you could make me change my mind.”

Jane hadn’t thought of it that way. She’d been told she was bad at reading people, but *people* didn’t follow neat, predictable mathematical rules the way stars and galaxies did. And now that she thought of it, the problem with this black-hole-like object was also a problem of reading people, wasn’t it? Pandora was hiding the truth, for her own reasons, and nobody could read her well enough to figure out what those reasons could be.

“Thor,” she said. “You’re... maybe a little more impartial. You haven't talked to Pandora yourself, like the Vision and I have, but you didn't immediately decide this was bad news the way Stark did. What do *you* think is going on here?” Jane gestured to the drifting images above her.

He thought about it for a moment. “Those who keep secrets usually do so for a good reason,” he said carefully. “Or at least, for what *seems* like a good reason to themselves.”

“That's what your Dad said,” Jane agreed. “He told me nobody can know where all the Infinity Stones are, because any one person who knew might try to use them. He said he trusted *me* not to do that.”

“Then he respects you very much, indeed,” said Thor, surprised and perhaps even a little hurt by this revelation. “He does not trust *me* with such knowledge. I don't think he even trusts himself.”

Jane shouldn't have smiled, but she couldn't help it. Thor with his feelings hurt looked like a big, sad golden retriever. “I don't think it's that he doesn't *trust* you, I think he doesn't want you to get hurt,” she offered. Her own father had hid his illness from his daughters for years, because he didn't want to frighten them. “He doesn't care as much what happens to me.”

“I care what happens to you, and to your world,” said Thor. He stood watching the simulated galaxies a few seconds longer. “Have you told Pandora that you know she's been lying to you?”

“No,” said Jane, then corrected herself. “Well... sort of. I did call bullshit on something she said, but I don't think she understood the expression.” If she *had*, she hadn't responded. “But I didn't confront her directly, and neither did the Vision. I don't think he wants to offend her.”

“The Vision has referred to Pandora as his sister,” Thor observed. “He may not want to confront her because he does not wish to believe she would betray his confidence.”

Thor would know about that, Jane thought sadly. He would know how much a family member's lies hurt, even a family member who wasn't related by blood. Odin probably wasn't making the situation any better by stubbornly trying to erase Loki from the family history.

“We need to talk to Pandora again, don't we?” Jane asked. “Without the Vision, and without Stark and all those other people around. That could be...” she grimaced. “Difficult.” She and Thor had left while the delegates and reporters were still eating breakfast. What was happening down there now? It might be days, even weeks, before anybody had a moment alone with the console again. Why hadn't she pressed harder last night, when she'd had the chance?

“Perhaps I can get us a private channel,” Thor offered.
“How?” asked Jane, but a moment later her face brightened as she figured it out. “When I would talk to you on the Quantum Pot, you must have needed another one here to receive me!”

“Exactly,” said Thor. “And it will now be...” he paused, trying to remember the word humans used for this particular aspect of his people's sorcery.

“Entangled,” Jane supplied.

“Entangled,” he agreed, “with the 'quantum system' Stark has created between your cauldron and his satellite.” Thor smiled as he offered her his hand. “You tell me that the scientists of Midgard do not speak in metaphors, but 'entangled' is a beautiful word.”

That was a surprising observation, but when Jane thought about it, he was right – the word was downright poetic. It offered a mental image of ghostly threads connecting two particles in space... or a mass of red cobwebs, in which Jane was forever a prisoner of the Aether. She shuddered a little, wishing her imagination hadn't taken it quite that far. “It is, isn't it?” she said, taking his arm. “I guess I get so used to thinking about the technical meaning, I forget about that. Are we gonna be able to keep our conversation from interrupting everybody else’s?”

“Pandora seems more than intelligent enough to separate the two,” Thor said.

They went up the stairs this time. Jane had seen the palace's grand staircase on her last visit to Asgard, but had not climbed them – an immense flight of carved granite steps, with colourful textiles draped around the banister railings and tall leaded-glass windows spilling rainbows across the floor. Thor's private suite was on the third floor. Its rooms were huge and open in the same style as the rest of the place, with high ceilings and no proper divisions between rooms, and with every possible surface richly decorated in carving, embroidery, or inlay. Thor led her past fountains, tapestries, and ornate furniture to a corner by the balcony, where he kept his Quantum Pot.

The one he'd given to Jane was the portable version. The Cauldron in Thor's room was big enough that Jane could have climbed into it, and probably had room for Darcy, too. A thin trickle of white mist was spilling over the lip. The outside surface was a dull gold colour, worked with a design of serpents among thorny branches. These seemed to stay still whenever Jane looked directly at it, but the moment she glanced away, out of the corner of her eye she was sure she saw it move.

“Loki was always better with these things than I,” Thor murmured as he waved a hand over the Pot. He'd shown Jane how to activate the one he'd given her, but what he was doing now was clearly more complex. The mist changed colours and began pouring out in greater volume, then suddenly sank to become a lead-gray fog hanging just inside the Cauldron itself. “Try that,” said Thor.

Jane leaned over the Pot a little. “Pandora?” she asked.

The mist pulsed a couple of times, as if something inside the Pot were searching for a signal. Then it rose up to form an image of the Oracle satellite, floating in space.

“Pandora?” Jane repeated.

“Greetings, Dr. Jane Foster,” the voice replied, echoing a little in the cauldron. “You are speaking to me from a different location than the Vision and his guests.”

“Yes, I am,” said Jane. “I'm on Asgard. It's not exactly another planet, more sort of a spot perched in a higher dimensional space where they can look down on other worlds.” Thor had never been able to explain this to her in a way that made real sense. “Some allies of Earth live here.”

“This is the first I have heard of it,” said Pandora. “Have you contact with many other civilizations,
“I think you need to answer some questions before I answer any,” said Jane. “Because there's a lot of things you haven't told us, either.” On the way up the stairs she'd been trying to think of what the Vision might say in this situation. What was the best way to confront Pandora while still being tactful, so as not to risk ruining the relationship between humans and Brising before it had even really begun. Now that she was actually here, however, she'd decided there wasn't one. If Jane hedged, it would only give Pandora the opportunity to lie again. It was time to just go for it. “We want to talk to Tiresias.”

“I don't know that name” said Pandora.

Of course she didn't – that was the name the Vision had given her. “Your passenger. Her name means 'bad news', so the Vision calls her Tiresias, like he calls you Pandora.”

“I don't have any passengers,” Pandora insisted. “Only Cargo.”

“Well, maybe she's part of your cargo, then,” said Jane, folding her arms across her chest. Her mind briefly flashed back to her first thesis defense. One of the judges had told her she needed to be less confrontational. It was a piece of advice she'd heard over and over in the years since, and she'd never really made much progress with it. Now didn't seem like a good time to try, either. “We know she's there. We've got a telepath who can feel her, and she says Tiresias is afraid of us. We want to know about this singularity that seems to be following you, and since you don't want to talk to us about it, maybe she will.”

“I will... process this request,” said Pandora uncertainly, and fell silent.

A breeze was blowing through one of the windows of Thor's chambers, moving the curtains, and Jane could hear a raven croaking somewhere outside. If she'd believed in bad omens, she might have taken that for one.

After a few long seconds, the voice spoke again. “I may no longer communicate with Earth or Asgard,” it said, and the image of the satellite dissolved. Jane stared for a moment, then grabbed the edge of the pot and shouted into it. “Hey! Come back!” Her voice echoed off the hollow metal sides, as if the interior of the Cauldron were much bigger than its outside.

There was no response. Pandora was gone, and a moment later the mist began bubbling up neutrally again, as if to confirm the lost connection. Jane looked at Thor, but he shook his head – if Pandora didn't want to talk, there was no way to force her.

“This... might be bad,” Jane said. If Pandora was not allowed to talk to them anymore, what about all those politicians and delegates back on Earth?
So far, things seemed to be going pretty well. Tony stood at the back of the crowd in the console room, watching and making mental notes as the politicians and reporters spoke to Pandora. People were politely waiting their turns, the questions were straightforward, and so were the alien AI’s answers. Tony had FRIDAY recording audio and video of the session so that he could analyze everything in more detail later. Somewhere in here there would be information he could use.

“What do these 'Brisings' look like?” asked a reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle.

“Very much like you,” Pandora replied, “although somewhat smaller on average, and their cellular chemistry is based on metals instead of carbon. You would probably compare their appearance to liquid silver, and all would appear feminine by your standards.”

“An entire planet of silver babes?” somebody spoke up.

“That is correct,” said Pandora, who apparently understood the words but not the connotations. Tony wasn't sure if that were good or bad, but he knew even he wasn't going to try to have sex with a being who existed at eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit.

The next question came from a political ambassador. “Would the Brisings be interested in trade with Earth?” she wanted to know.

“I don't think that would be practical,” Pandora said. “Our technology and raw materials would be useless at the frigid temperatures on your world, and yours would melt or burn on ours. But if we think of any exceptions, I'm sure we can come to an agreement.”

Tony made a note of that. He'd have to look into less expensive ways to get stuff into space... on the very slim chance this somehow all worked out okay.

“Pandora,” another politician said – a UN Security Council representative with a British accent. “I understand that you used some kind of gravity pulse weapon against the machines sent to investigate you. I'm sure you understand that this makes us a little nervous. Can you provide some information about the power and range of this device?”

So far, Pandora had answered every question immediately and politely. Now, however, she seemed to hesitate. There was enough of a pause that the man felt the need to prompt her.

“Pandora?” he said again.

“I may no longer communicate with Earth or Asgard,” said Pandora.

“I'm sorry,” the representative said quickly. “That wasn't meant to insult you, it was just a question.”

There was no reply. Silence hung over the room for several seconds, then a few murmured conversations began as people tried to figure out what had just happened, and Tony's stomach sank. Pandora hadn't seemed like she was insulted by anything. She'd shared information on Brising science and physiology without batting a metaphorical eye. She'd apologized for destroying the Iron Valkyries. Had that really been all it took, just a sideways hint that Earth might be interested in defending itself?

“Maybe there's something wrong with the console,” he offered, and stepped up to inspect it – but he knew in his gut that he wouldn't find anything wrong. Sure enough, all the scientific equipment on
the Oracle was still functioning perfectly. The cameras were recording, the instruments were reading the solar wind and keeping track of nearby objects, and the gravity wave detector was quietly recording the delicate interactions between Brising's singularity and the sun's gravity well. The only possibly reason for the lack of replies was because Pandora had stopped talking.

He turned around and addressed the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “it looks like we're having some technical issues here. I'm afraid we're gonna have to cut this one short for today.”

“I will see you out,” the Vision offered. “Perhaps you would be interested in viewing the lawn outside, which bears the mark of where Thor called the Bifrost this morning.”

Tony waited, leaning on the tabletop while people filed out. Only after they were all gone, except for himself, Steve, and Rhodey, did he allow himself to slump and take his sunglasses off so he could rub his forehead.

“What just happened?” asked Steve. “Did we offend her?”

“I'm gonna guess she doesn't want to share anything she thinks we can weaponize,” said Rhodey. “When was she talking to Asgard, though?”

Tony didn't know the answer, and didn't care. “I sure hate being right,” he said.

In the few seconds between Jane insisting that she speak to Tiresias and Pandora cutting off communications, a brief but very unpleasant conversation had happened. It was followed by a second, considerably longer and even more uncomfortable.

Pandora always knew where Tiresias was. She monitored her passenger's life signs constantly, partly because Tiresias' safety was one of her responsibilities, and partly because she was terrified what Tiresias might do if she stopped. For the moment she had little cause to worry about violence – Tiresias was curled in her cocoon, not quite asleep but not really awake. What was causing Pandora anxiety was that she had been there for more than a day now, without eating or washing. Pandora knew what her creator needed to do for herself, but could not force her to do it. It was deeply frustrating.

Mother, she said.

“What now?” Tiresias asked.

Dr. Foster is addressing us from a place called Asgard. She would like to speak with you.

A moment went by before Tiresias realized the implications of this, and then she sat up sharply. “You told her about me?” she asked, eyes wide with fear. “But I...”

I didn't tell her, said Pandora. She already knew. The Vision says that some humans have telepathic abilities, and one of them was able to sense your presence. Dr. Foster would like to talk to you about the phenomenon following us.

“Stop calling it 'the phenomenon'!” Tiresias moaned. “You know very well what it is and what it wants!”

No, we don't, Pandora corrected patiently. You're jumping to conclusions. It seems probable that this is the Many Voices, but at the present we have no proof. Won't you speak with Dr. Foster? she pleaded. I think the two of you could learn much from...
“No!” said Tiresias, waving her arms for emphasis. “No, cut them off! Both Earth and Asgard! Don’t talk to them again!”

*What about the people I’m speaking with on Earth? Representatives from many...*

“Shut them down!” Tiresias pulled her own hair again. “That’s an order. If you keep talking to them, they will become a danger to the Cargo!”

Pandora could not sigh, but she managed to communicate the equivalent as she passed the message on and then ceased transmitting. She could hear the responses coming in from both places – the people on Earth were confused, fearing they’d done something to offend her, while on Asgard Dr. Foster was angry and afraid. *May I at least explain to them why...*

“No! No more transmissions.” Tiresias sat very still for a minute or so, her head in her hands, and then stood up. “I’m leaving the ship.”

*Don’t be absurd, Mother.*

Tiresias opened a compartment in the ceiling and pulled down a spacesuit. “The Many Voices will find me in space, and then it won’t have any more reason to follow us,” she said firmly. “It won’t disturb the Cargo, it won't bother this other world, and it won't find the Mind Gem.”

*You don’t know for sure that it wants you, Pandora pointed out. It may have other goals altogether.*

“It hates me,” Tiresias reminded her. “You told me so yourself. It hates all living things, but it hates me the most.”

*Assume this phenomenon is the Many Voices, Pandora said. You are aware that the humans of Earth have had contact with the Mind Gem. After consuming your mind, won’t it then know to seek them out next? Besides, I would be lonely without you.*

“Yes but you could still function.” Tiresias held up the spacesuit, examining it as if looking for damage. There was none, but she did not move to start putting it on. Pandora found that a hopeful sight. “You’ll have new masters once the embryos start to grow, but I can’t survive without you. I’m a drain on your resources. If I leave, you’ll have more energy and materials to devote to the Cargo.”

*Don’t test me like that! You know what I’ll choose if I have to, but I don’t want to make that choice! Most of the time Pandora did not mind her own nonphysical being, but at times like this she wished she could have grabbed Tiresias and shaken her.*

Tiresias lowered the spacesuit, hanging her head. “I should never have come. I should have stayed behind to die. I’m here because I’m a selfish coward. I was too scared of death, or of what might be waiting for me on the other side of it.”

*No, Mother,* said Pandora. A moment ago she’d wanted to shake her creator, but now she wanted to hug her. *You came because you feared I would encounter obstacles my programming could not surmount, or decisions I am not qualified to make. We are facing such a threat now, and I need you. A selfish coward would have forced me to leave her behind and go on alone. I need your help. What are we going to do?*

“I don’t know,” Tiresias whispered. “I need to think.”

Pandora wanted to object that Tiresias had done nothing *but* think since she’d brought her out of hibernation, but that would risk encouraging her to suicide. What would Pandora have done if Tiresias hadn’t been here? Certainly, she wouldn’t have kept so many secrets from the humans, or
rudely cut off communication with creatures who could have been useful allies. If Tiresias were
gone...

No, that was a dangerous thought. Pandora's duty was to renew and protect the lives in her care, and
Tiresias was one of those. No matter how infuriating her irrational behaviour might be, she was still
Mother, and Pandora would keep her safe as long as she could.

“If I'm no use...” Tiresias began.

I'm not here to help you destroy yourself, said Pandora. Tiresias would have been more than capable
of that on her own. I must tend to the Cargo now. It's time to begin early germination, so that we
will have seedlings ready for planetfall. But please, try to make a plan. I recommend that we re-open
talks with the humans, and perhaps with the inhabitants of Asgard if they are willing. They can help
us monitor the phenomenon. But failing that, you know best how little time we have if the Many
Voices are coming for us.

“Yes, I do,” Tiresias said sadly. She stood still for a moment, unable to make a decision – then she
stuffed the spacesuit back in its compartment before opening a display and sitting down to work.

Jane loved traveling by Bifrost. She loved seeing the stars and galaxies spinning by, shadowed by
the black branches of Yggdrasil. She loved the rush of adrenaline, the mad feeling of free fall, the
colours all around her. But none of that meant the experience wasn't also slightly terrifying, and she
always clung tightly to Thor – which was rather embarrassing when the Rainbow Bridge dropped
them outside Avengers HQ in front of a crowd of guests. She quickly let go of him and tried to stand
up straight, which wasn't easy with her knees still shaking from the transit.

“And now you've had the rare experience of seeing the Bifrost in action,” said the Vision pleasantly.
He was standing at the front of the crowd, dressed in a suit and tie and smiling as if this were all
perfectly normal. By Avengers standards, it probably was. “These, of course, are Prince Thor of
Asgard and Dr. Jane Foster, winner of the Nobel Prize in physics for her work on the Convergence
of the Realms.”

Jane recognized several faces from her presentation at the UN. “Um, hi,” she said. She looked at the
Vision, hoping for good news, but had very little hope of getting any.

The Vision might have been about the say something, but before he could, Darcy elbowed her way
to the front of the crowd. “Jane, you missed it!” she said. “Pandora had some kind of virtual hissyfit
and now she's not speaking to us! I didn't even get to give her my mix tape!”

“Oh, no,” Jane groaned. So they had been in the middle of talking to Pandora when it happened.
Had they gotten the same abrupt I may no longer communicate with Earth or Asgard that she had?
Did they know that Jane was the one who'd screwed up? Had Darcy really made...

She raised her head, frowning. “You made them a mix tape?”

“Yeah.” Darcy held up her Zune. “That's what we've been doing for aliens since we first started
trying to talk to them – we make them mix tapes! There were records on each of the Voyager probes
with stuff like Mozart and Chuck Berry. I figured if that was the last Earth music she'd heard, she'd
probably want to catch up.”

“Why do you still have a Zune?” asked Jane – then realized it wasn't a priority. “Look, I need to
know what happened.” She needed to know just how much of a mess she'd made and how bad she
needed to feel about it.
“Tony is working on that now,” the Vision said.

“Where is he?” asked Jane, not sure yet whether she was planning on telling him or avoiding him.

“At the Oracle console.” The Vision looked at Thor. “Would you mind entertaining our guests for a moment?”

Thor probably wasn't happy about that, not after he'd already had to babysit his father's dwarf breakfast earlier, but he rose to the occasion much better than Jane would have. “Of course,” he said, and addressed the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen of Midgard, I fear I don't know much more about the Brisings than you do as of yet, but perhaps I can satisfy some of your curiosity regarding my own realm.”

The Vision gestured for Jane to accompany him. “Right this way, Dr. Foster,” he said.

She nodded and went along. “Are we going to tell Stark what happened?” she asked in a whisper.

“I think we'd best,” said the Vision. “He deserves to know.”

Tony had the console in a number of pieces by the time the Vision came back with Dr. Foster in tow. Wanda was helpfully levitating one of the larger pieces of equipment so he could work on it from underneath, while Rhodey called off numbers from a display for him. They weren't making any progress, of course, so it was kind of a relief to have an excuse to take a break. Tony heard something in his back go pop as he sat up, and he grimaced. Was it possible he really was getting too old for this?

“How is Oracle?” the Vision asked.

“There's nothing wrong with it,” Tony replied, stretching to see if that would produce another pop. It did not. Behind him, Wanda lowered the machine down onto the tile. “She's just not talking. One question about the gravity weapon, and she clammed up.”

He saw Dr. Foster wince, and for once, Tony agreed with her – but he was unprepared for what she said next.

“Yeah, about that.” Dr. Foster took a deep breath. “I know why she stopped.”

Tony's eyebrows rose. “Well, that would make you the smartest person in the room,” he said, “and that's not a title I cede very often.” Pepper and the Vision had conspired to hide all his alcohol, so he popped open a can of Monster instead. He had a feeling he was going to need it. “Please enlighten the rest of us.”

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“Yeah, about that.” Dr. Foster took a deep breath. “I know why she stopped.”

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“It was me,” Dr. Foster admitted. “Thor and I were talking to Pandora from Asgard, and I'm the one who made her angry.” She hesitated a moment, squirming. “There's... there's a few things the Vision and I haven't told you.”

Tony paused with his can of soda resting on his lower lip. He wasn't surprised that Dr. Foster would keep secrets from him, nor was he particularly upset about it – she didn't like him any better than he did her. But the idea that the Vision had been lying to him was something different. Tony looked at the android, hoping that Dr. Foster were exaggerating, but the Vision just nodded slightly in confirmation. It made Tony's chest ache, right in the scar where the arc reactor had been.

He set the can down and pointed to each of them in turn. “You two... you've been communicating with these things behind my back.”
“Not exactly,” said the Vision.

“Yes, exactly,” Dr. Foster corrected. “At least, I was this morning.”

“And now she's mad at you,” Tony said cautiously. What had she said? Dr. Foster and the Vision were the ones who liked these aliens, who believed them when they said all they wanted was to build homesteads on Venus and mind their own business. Why would Pandora be angry with them? What did they know that was so terrible they couldn't tell Tony about it, but not terrible enough to change their minds about the Brisings' intentions? “What did you say?”

“Okay.” Dr. Foster held her hands up as she explained. “So there's some kind of object following Brisingr at an unknown distance. I'm not sure what it is but it looks like a small black hole. I tried to ask Pandora what it was and she kept saying it was nothing, but the Vision asked her some test questions and realized she was lying about it. So today I asked her if I could talk to Tiresias instead and I think I might have been...” she shrugged. “Too confrontational.”

Tony frowned. “Tiresias?” he asked. That was the first time he'd heard the name.

“Pandora's passenger,” the Vision explained. “Her cargo is mostly embryos, but there is one adult who doesn't want to communicate with us. We only know about her because Wanda was able to sense her mind.”

“I could only see her name and her fear,” Wanda put in, “but she is there. I'll try to reach her again when she is closer to Earth.”

This information did vindicate Tony's suspicion that they couldn't trust Pandora, and the mention of a black hole was worrying – but he didn't see why they couldn't have told him those things before. “Anything else?” he asked.

Dr. Foster and the Vision exchanged a glance, and then it was the latter who spoke. “Tiresias created Pandora in the same way you created Ultron,” he said. “By uploading information from the Mind Gem.”

Now that was something Tony could see hiding from him.

For a moment the only thing he could think of was Ultron staggering in with the body of the broken Iron Legion drone. He could smell the alcohol and the night air, and hear the click and scrape of robotic steps, see the chilly blue glow animating the drone and feel the creeping cold horror as he began to realize what a terrible mistake he'd made. Then the flashback faded, leaving behind hurt. The Vision had kept this from him. The Vision was made from JARVIS – shouldn't he, of all people, have trusted Tony? Was there nothing of that friendly AI left in him?

“And why didn't you tell me any of this?” he asked, his jaw clenched.

Neither Dr. Foster nor the Vision answered him, but Wanda did. “We thought it would scare you,” she said.

Tony turned to glare at her, knowing full well that she could read his mind. “Well, you were right,” he said. “I'm scared.”

Tony was up very late that evening, stripping old Ultron drones for their Vibranium. Doing so gave him something to occupy his hands, and the fact that it was a process of breaking things down and taking them apart also gave him a focus for his anger.
You have meddled with something you don't understand. That was what Thor had said to him after Ultron's first escape, and it was true as far as it went – Tony had been so excited about what the Mind Gem might be able to do that he hadn't stopped to figure out what it was before he tried to use it. He'd promised himself he wouldn't make that mistake again. Before putting what remained of JARVIS into the Vision, he'd made a very thorough study of what was in the cradle. He'd known everything he could know about what this android was and what it was for. Bruce hadn't seen the difference at first, but Thor had, and thank goodness for that. Defeating Ultron wouldn't have been possible without the Vision.

Now here they were again, with Tony making everything worse because he was trying to deal with a situation without knowing what was going on. It was somewhat comforting to think that at least this time it hadn't been his fault, but after a moment he realized that wasn't even true. It was his fault, in a roundabout way. Wanda had said they'd lied to him because they didn't want to scare him, but the truth was they were scared of him. They were scared of his reaction, and of what he might create in response. They were scared of the man who'd made Ultron, and they had every right to be.

But in one of those odd twists of fate that seemed to be so important in Tony's life, it was Ultron who was going to save them now. Ultron was the one who'd built the drones, and Ultron had figured out how to use Vibranium to let the Vision walk through walls. As irony went, that was downright Shakespearean.

Tony yanked a Vibranium strut out of what had once been an arm and set it aside on the growing pile. Had Tony been younger and less cynical, he thought, taking one of these apart would have been a positive joy to him. They were absolutely magnificent pieces of engineering, so efficient and so advanced that he could barely understand them. Machines designed by a machine! There was a word for that, for the moment when technology would become better at improving itself than humans were – it was called singularity, because it represented a sort of historical event horizon, a point beyond which the future became impossible to predict. What else might Ultron have created if he hadn't been so wrapped up in the idea of destruction?

Tony had made Ultron in the hope of creating a better world, and as always, it had all gone wrong. That was the thought on his mind when he heard the workshop door open.

“What do you want?” he demanded, having every intention of being rude until his unwanted visitor gave up and left – but then he looked up, and saw who it was. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry, Pep.”

Pepper shook her head. “Who did you think I was?” she asked, setting her shoes down by the door before she came to join him. Today she was wearing a burgundy pants suit. The colour of Cabernet Sauvignon. People said redheads couldn't wear certain colours, but whatever those colours were Tony hadn't seen them on Pepper yet. Anything she wore, she seemed to make it work.

“How's it going with the fashion police?” Tony wanted to know.

“Just something I threw on.” She pretended to inspect it as she sat down cross-legged in front of him. “Just something I threw on.”

“Is that a new outfit?” he asked.

“Who did you think I was?” she asked, setting her shoes down by the door before she came to join him. Today she was wearing a burgundy pants suit. The colour of Cabernet Sauvignon. People said redheads couldn't wear certain colours, but whatever those colours were Tony hadn't seen them on Pepper yet. Anything she wore, she seemed to make it work.

“I don't think they were paying any attention,” said Pepper. “My clothes aren't what's on anybody's mind right now. Have you been watching the news?”

“No,” Tony admitted, “but I can guess.” After only a day, the Brisings had suddenly stopped talking – and since nobody outside the Avengers knew about what had happened on Asgard, they would all be assuming it was because some British asshole had asked for weapons secrets. People were
probably panicking. Tony wondered if all the idiots with the badly-spelled signs were still in Grand Central Station, or whether they'd all gone home to hide in their end-of-the-world bunkers.

“Talk to me, Tony,” said Pepper gently.

He sat still for a moment, fidgeting with the wrench in his hands. With almost anybody else he would have said it was nothing, that he was fine – but Pepper had seen vulnerable parts of him even Rhodey never had. The only person who'd ever known him better was JARVIS.

“You know what?” he asked. “You know what my problem is?” Tony held up a drone's partially disassembled hand. “I'm turning into my father.”

Pepper clearly hadn't expected that. It was nice to know he could still surprise her. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Tony tried to explain. “After the war, Howard kept trying to create a better peacetime world, but everything he built turned into a weapon. Jarvis – Jarvis the butler – told me about it. Dad had a whole room full of stuff he eventually had to destroy. He hadn't meant any of it to be dangerous, but that was how it turned out. It was Dad who invented the arc reactor, not me.” Tony rubbed self-consciously at his chest. “But nobody remembers him for that. They remember him for the hydrogen bomb. In fifty years, when people think of Tony Stark, they're not going to think of faster communications and the end of fossil fuels. They're not going to think about Iron Man. They're going to think about Ultron. Every time I've saved the world, it's been from a problem I caused.”

He sat with his head down for a moment, afraid of what he might see when he looked Pepper in the face. He should have known better – when he did find the courage to look up, he found her eyes gentle, her smile caring.

“That's the point about you, Tony,” she said. “You do save the world from the problems you cause. You know when you've made a mistake, and you try to do something about it. There are so many people who don't do that. People like Stane and Killian – they make a mess and then leave the cleanup to others. You insist on doing it yourself, even when you shouldn't have to.”

Tony chuckled sadly. “Well, I guess that's something.”

“It's the first thing I tell people when they ask me what you're really like,” Pepper said.

“That's just because the company stock dips every time I screw up,” Tony pointed out.

“I'd rather it dip because of that than because of the shoes I wear,” Pepper sighed. “I'm thinking about hiring a fashion consultant. Somebody who can think about the possible ramifications of my wardrobe for me, so I can worry about more important things.”

“Maybe I can do that,” Tony teased. “I can't possibly bring about the end of the world through clothes, can I?”

She shook her head. “Tony, you went on the Ellen show wearing an Iron Man t-shirt.”

“That was a mistake,” Tony agreed. “I've never been so embarrassed as when she walked out wearing the exact same shirt.”

Pepper reached out and cupped his cheek. “It feels like weeks since I really saw you smile.”

Tony felt the smile melt away, and he hung his head again. “Probably because it has been,” he said, and set down the drone hand he'd been holding. It made an unusual dull noise when he put it down –
Vibranium's dampening properties meant it didn't ring like other metals did.

Vibranium. Like the Vision.

“You want to know the other thing?” he asked. “It's the Vision. I found out today he and Dr. Foster have been talking to Pandora behind my back. He doesn't trust me.” Tony shook his head. “Considering where he came from, maybe he's right not to, but...” He licked his lips, and then fell silent. There was no way to finish that sentence without sounding like a jealous asshole – because, Tony knew, a jealous asshole was exactly what he was.


“I feel so petty,” Tony grumbled. “I'm a grown man. I ought to be better than that. But he pals around with Thor and he dotes on Wanda, and... that's nice, you know? He's a proper person now, he's allowed to have his own friends, that's fine.”

“But you miss JARVIS,” Pepper said.

“Yeah.” Tony did miss JARVIS. He'd reprogrammed the Vision because he'd wanted JARVIS back in whatever form he might be able to have him, and knowing that it had failed, that he could never have his AI back... even after several months he still hadn't adjusted to the idea. FRIDAY was useful, but she wasn't the same, and he'd known she wouldn't be. That was why he'd deliberately chosen an interface whose voice and accent were not like JARVIS, to keep himself from having that false hope.

“Have you eaten today?” asked Pepper.

“Of course,” said Tony. He'd had a bowl of soup and a bun. There'd been vegetables in it and everything. That had been lunchtime. It was now ten thirty.

Pepper knew what he'd meant. “I'll have somebody send something up,” she said, and got to her feet. “I have to be up early tomorrow – I'm flying to Vienna for that green energy meeting. Which means,” she added, in a mock warning, “that you'd better give me something to remember you by before I go.”

He looked around at the Vibranium he'd gotten out of the drone so far. “Give me forty-five minutes to finish this up,” he said.

“Not a second more,” Pepper wagged a finger at him.

He smiled, but as soon as she was out of the room it vanished yet again. Tony hadn't told Pepper exactly what it was the Vision had kept from him, and for the same damned reason. He hadn't wanted to scare her. He hadn't wanted her to worry about what he might create in response to this new threat. Tony could handle knowing that Dr. Foster and Wanda were afraid of him, and even the Vision, but he couldn't bear to see that fear in the eyes of Pepper Potts.
In the morning, Tony returned from seeing Pepper to the airport and found another visitor – this one, he was prepared to be rude to.

“What do you want?” he asked, when he found the Vision in the workshop. The android didn't appear to have touched or moved anything, but while Tony had a photographic memory, he was pretty sure the Vision put things back precisely enough to fool him. He took several steps forward and kept his back straight. It was hard to stare down a six foot three inch robot, but Tony was going to try.

“I was waiting for you,” said the Vision. “I understand that you're upset with me.”

“Oh, you noticed, did you?” asked Tony.

“I did,” the Vision agreed, “but I was under the impression you wouldn't want to talk about it. Last night I spoke briefly with Miss Potts, however, and she said I probably ought to apologize to you.”

“Damn right,” said Tony, in no way placated. “If you guys had let me into your super-secret chocolate fudgey batcave, we might not be in this mess right now.”

“I had only the best intentions,” said the Vision.

“They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” Tony told him. “I don't know who they are, but I can tell you they're right. Believe me, I would know.”

People had misinterpreted or downplayed such remarks from Tony in the past, but the Vision did not do so. “You would, yes. Perhaps I should have taken a lesson from that. I realize also, I should have long ago expressed my condolences for the loss of your AI,” he added. “I know JARVIS meant a great deal to you.” He looked down at his hands, the way he had on his first night, when he'd admitted that he didn't know what he was. “I could help you recreate him, if you'd like.”

Maybe that idea should have excited Tony, but it didn't – and it didn't take him long to realize why not. The result of such an effort would never be anything more than a recreation. JARVIS' original memories had been nuked by Ultron, along with everything else on the Avengers Tower serves. Whatever he and the Vision managed to program would be a facsimile, a thing with JARVIS' voice but which was not JARVIS. A stranger wearing a familiar skin.

Tony couldn't take another one of those. “No, no thanks,” he said. “I... I've had somebody I loved come back from the dead for me once already. You don't get that twice in a lifetime.” He needed to change the subject before this conversation got too personal. “You know what you can do if you want to help me, though?” He gestured to the pile of drone parts spread out on the floor. “Now that we're all on the same page, you can help me try to solve this.”

The Vision examined his collection of bits and pieces. “What are you doing with them?”

“T'm trying to come up with a Vibranium alloy that can do that phasing thing of yours,” Tony said. “We need answers, and if Pandora won't give them to us, we'll have to go and get them. I can figure it out on my own, but that'll take longer, and patience has never been one of my virtues.” He watched the Vision's face carefully for a reaction.

There wasn't one – but then, a robot could be expected to be good at hiding his emotions, if he even really had any. Tony had liked to think that JARVIS did, but the truth was he would never know.
“I don’t like the idea of forcing Pandora and Tiresias to do anything,” the Vision said, voice and face neutral. “They’re already afraid of us, and this will only make it worse.”

Tony snorted. “How can you trust them when you know they’re lying to us?”

“I don’t trust them,” the Vision said, “but neither Wanda nor myself sensed any hostility from them, and when we don’t know why they’re keeping secrets we ought to give them some benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately,” he looked into Tony’s eyes, “their secrets are almost certainly putting both them and us in harm’s way. I don’t want to frighten them, but they’ve left us no choice except to...” he pursed his mechanical lips and searched for words for a moment, before settling on, “to pursue more aggressive negotiations.”

“You mean... negotiations with a light saber?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow.

“While I’m sure you could build a working light saber if you put your mind to it, I don’t think the situation calls for that,” the Vision observed. His dry tone was so very like JARVIS that Tony didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “What, specifically, is your plan? Am I correct in assuming it is related to your asking whether I could survive a gravity pulse by dematerializing?”

“Exactly,” said Tony. “If you can teach me to reproduce that effect, I can get a remote suit onto one of their ships. Something like the Iron Valkyries, but without the bombs. That way I’ll be able to see for myself what’s really going on out there, and talk to this Tiresias face-to-face.”

The Vision considered it. “Very well,” he said. “There are also Vibranium components in some of the wiring of the drones – I can extract that, if you would like, so it will not go to waste.”

Tony’s smile was as much out of relief as it was gratitude. Finally, one of them got it! “All right. I don’t want to use more than I have to, but every molecule counts.” He sat down to look at the drone he’d left open on the floor last night. “I’ll get the big bits, and you scrape up the crumbs.”

Because Stark and the Vision were busy with their plans and machines, they weren’t asked to deal with the fallout from Pandora’s communications cutoff. That job was left to the rest of the Avengers.

A few days after the breakdown, Jane shuffled downstairs in the morning wearing a pair of Hulk-feet slippers she’d borrowed from somebody, and found the kitchen full of people. The Avengers were awake and dressed in their gear, from guns and arrows all the way up to jetpacks and shields, and seemed to be in the process of grabbing a bite to eat before leaving on some sort of mission. Jane was in the middle of a stretch as she walked through the door, and froze there in surprise for a moment before dropping her arms and asking, “now what?”

“Protestors in Times Square are getting rowdy,” Captain America replied. He stuffed the second half of a granola bar into his mouth, washed it down with the dregs of a protein shake, and then checked his watch. “We’re gonna go reassure them that we have the situation well in hand.”

“Despite all appearances to the contrary,” the Black Widow observed dryly. She downed the rest of her orange juice and put the glass in the sink.

“If all else fails, we can have Wanda disperse them,” Captain America added, “although that’s a last resort.”

Hawkeye checked his phone. “Yahoo News says they’re looting the Toys R Us. If we’re fast, I can blend into the crowd and grab Lila one of those Monster High dolls for her birthday.”

Nearly every room in Avengers Headquarters had Stark’s interactive holograms available. The Black
Widow called one up, and scrolled through TV channels until she found a news program with live footage from a helicopter. Times Square was a mess, with traffic backed up in all directions, unable to get through the crowd. Storefront windows had been broken, potted plants and garbage cans overturned, and a sign advertising a Broadway production of *The Lion King* had fallen down to block 44th Street. The news camera zoomed in on the signs the protestors were holding above their heads. *WHERE ARE THE AVENGERS?* demanded one. *WHERE IS THE TRUTH?* asked another. *CHECK IT OUT, I'M ON TV!* said a third.

“Yeah, looks like time to go,” the Widow said.

The Avengers filed out with their breakfasts in hand. Jane caught Thor's cape as he passed.

“Be careful,” she said.

He smiled fondly and brushed her hair behind her ear. “I am the son of Odin,” he reassured her. “I am mightier than a few angry mortals with nonsensical placards.”

Jane lowered her head and self-consciously reached up to where his fingers had touched her. Of course, she reminded herself – it was even sillier for her to worry about him than it was for him to try to protect her. “Well, be careful of them, then,” she said. “We're pretty breakable, us mortals.”

“I will harm nobody unless forced,” Thor promised. “You stay safe as well, Jane. The mob has not come this far, not yet, but if they do, please promise me you will not go out to confront them, no matter how tempting it may be.” He glanced out the window at the lawn and the woods beyond. The Headquarters was out here so that it would be away from the crowds and politics of the cities, and to ensure that any attack on the Avengers themselves would not lead to civilian casualties – but the location was not a secret. If the protestors wanted to bring their message directly to the Avengers, they could. “You are my favourite of all breakable mortals,” Thor said, “and you do like to argue.”

“That I do,” Jane agreed. The disaster with Pandora was still fresh in her mind. “All right, I promise. I won't leave the building.”

“Thor! You riding, or flying?” Captain America called.

Jane stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Don't take two years to come back this time.”

“I won't.” Thor kissed her hand in return, and then in a swirl of red cape, he was gone.

The kitchen seemed enormous without a half-dozen superheroes milling around in it. Now that they were gone, Jane enlarged the holoscreen with the news broadcast, and she and Darcy sat and ate their breakfasts while watching it.

It wasn't much fun to watch. The Avengers dropped from their jet to surround the plaza, and Captain America climbed up on top of a stranded yellow cab and tried to explain that everything was under control. Nobody believed him – the crowd shouted and threw things, including an ice cream cone, several shoes, and a cantaloupe melon that hit the shield in a splatter of seeds. Thor tried to take over, but the crowd shouted him down, and soon nothing could be heard but the thousands of voices chanting the name of the person they thought was really responsible for this mess: Iron Man.

For once, Jane actually felt rather sorry for Stark. He wasn't the reason Pandora had cut everybody off. Those people should have been howling for Jane's blood instead – and she wasn't above being selfishly glad that they weren't.

“Another crowd has gathered across the street from UN headquarters,” the anchorwoman said,
where volunteers from the armed forces are doing their best to keep them out of the road. Inside, the World Security Council is trying to come up with an Earth Defense Plan.”

They cut to a different reporter, who was interviewing a security council member. Jane, with a mouth of Lucky Charms cereal, sat up straight and pointed at the holoscreen with her spoon. “I know that guy!” she said. “That's the British idiot who kept asking me about the gravity control being a weapon!”

“Your Excellency,” the reporter said, holding out his microphone, “what can you tell us about this plan?”

“Nothing as of yet,” the councilman replied, “but it will not involve the Avengers.” He looked directly into the camera. “We do not believe in relying on superheroes to get us out of these situations.” The amount of contempt he invested in the world superheroes was impressive.

The shot cut back to the anchorwoman. “Other public spaces, including Central Park and Empire State University’s Morningside Campus, are also host to protests this morning,” she said, “and major cities across the world are seeing outcries of anger and fear at the approaching spacecraft.” They went through a series of pictures of marches all over the place: The Piazza San Pietro in Rome, the Forbidden City in Beijing, The Palácio Tiradentes in Rio de Janiero, Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto. “Police are advising people near these demonstrations to stay in their homes or places of work...”

Darcy put a handful of crasins in her mouth. “Guess I'm not getting that trip to the MoMA,” she remarked.

“Probably not,” Jane agreed.

“So what do we do today?” Darcy asked.

“Try to take over the world?”

“I wish.” Jane knew she had to work and she should have been eager to start. Now that they'd lost all change of Pandora telling them herself, the fate of the world might well depend on Jane figuring out what that gravitational lens actually was. Challenging scientific puzzles were Jane's favourite thing, and she had promised Thor she'd stay inside. Something about not having any choice in the matter, however, made her groan.

“Are you getting cabin fever already?” Darcy checked the time on her phone. “it's not even ten.”

“I might be,” Jane grumbled.

Then another voice spoke up, this one female with a broad Irish brogue. Excuse me, Dr. Foster, said FRIDAY, but the Vision has requested that you join him and Mr. Stark in the console room. They're working on an alternative method of communicating with Brisingr.

Jane didn't like the sound of that. She stood up, brushing crumbs off her lap. “Tell them I'll be right there,” she said.

She walked into the console room – realizing only too late to do anything about it that she was about to confront Stark while in her pajamas, again – and found the two men working on what appeared to be the skeleton of an Iron Man suit. Except that it couldn't be that, because the suits didn't have skeletons. There was no room for them with a person inside. This contraption was almost more
reminiscent of the Ultron drones she remembered seeing on the news.

“Hey!” Stark said as she entered. “Who invited you?”

“I did,” the Vision told him calmly. “So far we've all been hiding information from each other, to our mutual detriment. I wanted Dr. Foster to know what we're working on.”

Jane looked at the humanoid machine again, frowning. “Yeah, what is it?” she asked.

“Prometheus,” said Stark. “Since it seems our mythology is coming from Greece now, Prometheus was the guy who told his brother not to marry Pandora. His brother didn't listen to him, and it ended badly for the human race.” He looked directly at Jane. “What do you think?”

“I think you're stretching the reference just a little,” Jane told him. “Nobody's going to marry Pandora.”

“No, we're just thinking about letting her move in,” Stark said. “Close enough.”

The Vision cleared his throat. “You'll notice there's no room for a payload,” he said. “We don't want Pandora and Tiresias to feel threatened. We also need to think about what we're going to say to them when we get there, and I feel that both sides of our argument ought to have some input to that. I'm sure you two can find some common ground,” he added, looking from Stark to Jane and back again. “You are, after all, colleagues.”

“I guess,” Stark admitted grudgingly. He gestured to Jane. “You're a scientist, I'm a scientist.”

Jane folded her arms across her chest. “You do applied sciences,” she said.

“Oooh!” Stark shook a finger at her. “Those are fighting words, Dr. Foster!”

She rolled her eyes at the attempt at a joke. “What is this contraption for?” she asked. How did they use an Iron Man suit to talk to Pandora?

Stark looked ready to answer, but the Vision did it for him. “We can no longer question Pandora and Tiresias at a distance,” he explained. “This machine, like the Iron Valkyries, can be controlled remotely and will hopefully be resistant to the gravity pulse weapon. A user ought to be able to confront the Brisings in a much more face-to-face manner. But communication with the Brisings will be of no avail to us,” he added patiently, “if we do not communicate with each other. Can we all agree to that?”

Jane looked at Stark, waiting for his answer. He looked back, waiting for hers. One or other of them would have to crack and speak first, and to Jane's own disgusts, it ended up being her.

“All right,” she said. “I'm in.”

Stark nodded stiffly. “The more, the merrier, they say,” he said, and held out a hand. Jane took it, and shook it once – a suspicious, unfriendly handshake, but a handshake nonetheless.

It was apparently enough for the Vision. “Very well,” he said. “Dr. Foster, you've been collecting data on this gravitational anomaly for some months. What can you tell us about it?”

“Is it gonna be dangerous to this new project?” Stark asked.

So that was the real reason, Jane thought. “Probably not,” she said. “It's at least a light-year behind them. I can show you my data on it, though, if I can get my laptop.” Now that she'd agreed to
The Iron Valkyries had been launched with little fanfare. The Avengers had tried to do the same with Oracle, but people had found out and made their displeasure known. They didn't want a repeat, or an escalation, of those protests, so the entire existence of the Prometheus drone was kept as close a secret as possible. Materials and equipment moved only at night, and there was no loud, easily visible rocket launch. Instead, Iron Man personally flew the capsule into low earth orbit and let it fire its own thrusters from there. It was not an efficient way to get something into space, but it avoided a public spectacle, and that was the important thing.

Brisingr was drawing inexorably closer to Earth, but it was still twice as far away as Pluto, and the solar system continued to arrange itself so as to make the trip as inconvenient as possible. Despite the probe itself being the fastest thing ever launched from earth and the journey almost a third shorter, Prometheus took nearly as long as Oracle to arrive at its destination. Twelve days crawled by in anxiety and doubt, politics and preparation and slow, aching dread.

Five years ago, when she'd been sneaking into a secret outpost in the desert with a man who was either a fallen god or a lunatic, Jane had wondered if she were losing her mind. Two years ago, with an alien energy source devouring her from the inside out, she'd been sure she was. Now, waiting while the anxious hours ticked past, second by agonizing second, she realized she'd been wrong on both occasions. If Jane Foster ever just snapped and went gibbering mad, it would be now.

“If this world should come to an end,” Thor said, as the two of them watched the news over TV dinners one evening, “I shall take you back to Asgard with me. There you can live on, and study the heavens to your heart's content.”

That was a kind offer, as well as a very tempting one – the idea of a real crack at Asgard's libraries made Jane want to drool. Yet it also reminded her of the moments she'd spent looking out on that world with Malekith whispering to her through the Aether. There was no need to hesitate, the voice had said. She could savour the rush that came from wielding destruction, while saving whatever she would rather keep. Jane had brought herself out of that trance by wondering what it was she would prefer to save. Once she started choosing things, where would she stop?

“What about Darcy?” she asked. “And Eric? And Ian?”

“They can come along, of course,” said Thor. “They are your friends and mine.”


“Your sister? Any of your family are welcome in Asgard,” Thor promised.

“And her family?” Jane said. “She's got a husband and two step-kids, and a whole zoo of animals. Can we bring them, too?”

“If we can get to them in time, certainly,” said Thor – but his tone was wary. Thor wasn't stupid, despite what some people seemed to think. He could tell she had someplace to go with her questions, and was wondering what it was.

“What about the other Avengers and their families?” Jane persisted. “Somebody mentioned that Barton's married with kids. Stark's got Pepper, and I heard Captain America say that Colonel Rhodes could bring his girlfriend to some event. Can they come?”

Thor sighed. “I know I can't save everybody, Jane, but surely I can save what is most dear to me.”
There was the problem – the line, and where to draw it. Jane shook her head, and stared at the television screen without seeing what was on it. “The Brisings built an ark full of embryos, no adults,” she said. Of course, embryos were smaller, easier to maintain in stasis, required less nourishment... there were a thousand reasons why they were a better choice to undertake a five million year journey. But there was also this. “They couldn't choose who to save, so they didn't save anybody. They started over with a clean slate. That's fair.”

“Fair, perhaps,” Thor said, “but not what I would call a victory. Besides, they did save one person. Tiresias. Of however many their people were, why do you suppose they chose her?”

“I don't know. Maybe she was just the last one left to do it,” Jane suggested. But she had a hunch – a nasty and completely unscientific one – that there was a far more significant reason than that. “I hope the world doesn’t end. I wouldn't want you to have to pick.”

“I hope your world doesn’t end, either.” Thor leaned over to kiss her cheek. “There are still many flavours of ice cream I have not yet tried, and I would like to meet this sister of yours and her menagerie someday.”

“I'll introduce you,” Jane promised. “When this is all over.” When the world was saved, and they wouldn't have to worry about who they were taking to Asgard.

For much of his life, Tony Stark had lived and breathed publicity. Then, the whole superhero thing had begun to slowly teach him that publicity was not always a good thing. When the military was breathing down your neck because they wanted to kidnap your new friend and take him apart for bioweapons research, publicity was bad. When a terrorist knew where you lived and had armed attack helicopters, publicity was bad. When your artificial intelligence went postal and decided to exterminate the human race, publicity was definitely bad.

When aliens hung up on you in front of dozens of the world’s most important political figures, publicity was bad but unavoidable. When trying to get that connection back with no idea whether it would work, it was both avoidable and undesirable, so there were no eager crowds as the Prometheus probe came to life in the far reaches of the Kuiper belt – only Tony, piloting through the holographic interface, and the Vision and Dr. Foster watching to make sure he didn't screw up again.

The closer Brisingr got to the sun, the more light fell on it, and even though they were still some five and a half billion miles away, Prometheus found things much better-lit than the Iron Valkyries had. The increased solar wind was also stripping away the detritus of Brisingr’s long journey, leaving more of its pewter-coloured, crater-scarred hull visible. The sunlight glinted dully off that, and sparkled on the fog of debris surrounding the vessels.

It also reflected from the skin of Prometheus. They could have painted the drone, but they hadn’t – they’d left it the bare, slightly yellowish silver of natural Vibranium, so that it would stand out as a bright object in the darkness of space. That had been Dr. Foster’s idea, and the Vision had agreed with her. If it seemed like they were trying to sneak up on Brisingr, whoever or whatever was on board might panic and try to destroy Prometheus as they had the Iron Valkyries, and Tony would rather not deal with that. He was pretty his drone could survive the gravity weapon, but it was impossible to test when he had no way to generate a gravitational pulse of his own.

Now at last, he was standing in the holographic interface guiding Prometheus towards the alien ships. If he let his eyes drift, he could see the Vision standing there, and Dr. Foster sitting in a chair nervously fiddling with a soda can tab. If he kept them on the HUD, however, it was as if he were flying through space, approaching Brisingr from the side. The idea, once again, was easy visibility, and from this vantage point he could also see the entire train of objects, rotating gently as they sailed.
across the void. The Oracle satellite was still leading the way, still bringing in information about the
distribution of matter in the outer solar system, still recording the gravity waves produced by
Brisingr's contained singularity. It just wasn't transmitting messages anymore. Tony wondered why
Pandora hadn't destroyed it when she turned off the communications. Maybe he could get her to tell
him.

“Can you imagine the time and resources it must have taken to build something like that?” asked Dr.
Foster. “They must have bankrupted a planet.”

“If your choices are bankruptcy or extinction, I think the answer's pretty clear,” Tony said. “Give me
infra-red, FRIDAY. Let's see where the crew quarters are.”

Coming right up, said FRIDAY. She overlaid Prometheus' visual feed with a heat map of the
objects. A number of warm spots were immediately obvious: the singularity at the middle of the
biggest ship was red-hot, and there was warmth in the ring around it.

“You guys think that's it?” Tony asked.

circle the vessel, you'll probably find vents from a cooling system.”

Tony flew a long, slow loop around the giant spaceship, and did indeed locate three spots that were
absolutely blasting heat into space. “There they are,” he said.

“I would guess that the ring ship houses Pandora's main servers,” said the Vision.

“Looks like it, yeah,” Tony agreed. “Good to know.” If for any reason they ended up having to
destroy Pandora, they now knew where her vital organs were.

“There's more hotspots further back,” said Dr. Foster. Tony glanced past the display to see her
examining the footage on screens in front of her. “We're looking for something really
hot. The surface of Venus is seven hundred degrees Kelvin, so that's what a living Brising will consider a
comfortable temperature.”

“Got it.” Tony continued to guide Prometheus down the line of ships. It was an awful shame that he
was going to have to give Dr. Foster her Quantum Pot back. Flying in space, even in this strictly
virtual sense, was exhilarating. The technology could be used to explore the Moon and Mars, or even
more inaccessible places like the atmosphere of Jupiter or Earth's own deep oceans, without
endangering human lives. Maybe she would let him work on the Pot a little longer and take a few
more cracks at building his own before he had to return it.

“I'm seeing more vents,” he observed. The little bright patches peppered the vessels.

“They'll need to keep the embryos cold in stasis,” said Dr. Foster, “so they'll need heat sinks, and
there's nothing colder than space.”

“There appears to be a major hotspot in the third-to-last of the small vessels,” the Vision observed.

Tony went closer to check it out. There was, indeed, a very bright patch there – he was almost
surprised, when he turned the infra-red off again, to find that it wasn't glowing in the visible spectrum
as well.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Time to test this contraption.” He flicked a holographic switch, and activated
the density control. The display indicated that the magnetic field was in place, and the molecules in
Prometheus should have reconfigured their electron orbitals to be out of phase with other matter, but
from Tony's point of view nothing actually felt like it happened. If this didn't work, he thought, Prometheus would be splattered against the side of Brisingr like a very high tech bug on an old, space-worn windshield, and they'd have to start all over again.

“Platform Nine and Three Quarters, here we come,” said Tony. He gritted his teeth and fired up the thrusters.
The video feed flickered as Prometheus passed through Brisingr's meteor-scarred hull, but then it came right back, and Tony opened his eyes to find himself in a narrow, dimly-lit space. The thick atmosphere was shimmering with intense heat, and odd-looking robotic arms were working with rotating racks of stones and crystals. There wasn't enough room to phase the drone back into solidity without bumping into something, so Tony kept it immaterial as he watched.

The robot arms were interesting – they seemed to operate using bundles of carbon fiber or something similar, which flexed like muscle when current was applied to it. Delicate three- or four-clawed hands were carefully turning little blocks of stone sitting under heat lamps, or drizzling them with a dark orange liquid that Tony suspected was liquid sulfur. In some of the blocks, little tendrils and bubbles of metal appeared to be in the process of welling up from cracks or drilled holes.

“I believe those are the sprouts of Brising plants,” said the Vision – when Tony looked past the HUD, he could see the android and Jane Foster absolutely mesmerized by the video feed. “Pandora showed me an idea of what she hopes Venus will look like once they're settled. The life forms seem to be mostly mineral-based. I suspect she has begun germinating seeds to be planted upon landing.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully – that was another vulnerable spot he could hit them in. He moved around a little, working his way down a row of racks, but found only more robots and minerals. Some of the stone blocks had a covering of crystals or furry asbestos, while elsewhere there were pots of molten material with some kind of metallic scum on the surface. Still other 'plants' looked like twists or ropes of clay, like the result of a child trying to sculpt a snake.

“Save this video, JARVIS,” said Tony. “There's a bunch of astrobiology folks at NASA who are probably getting bored with dissecting frozen Chi'Tauri.”

Got it, boss, said FRIDAY.

“Dr. Foster can probably recommend somebody,” the Vision offered.

“I know a woman who does cellular biology,” said Jane. "She's speculated on the nature of alien cells before, actually – any chance of snagging some...”

“No samples,” the Vision interrupted. “Not without Pandora's explicit permission, at least. We must not give her the idea that we're a threat to her mission.”

“Of course. Sorry,” said Dr. Foster.

“There's nobody in here,” Tony said, looking around one more time just to be sure. “Anything about the size of a human wouldn't be able to fit in here. It wouldn't have any room to move.” Tiresias must be somewhere else in the caravan. “On to Platform Ten and Three Quarters, I guess.”

Tony slipped back through the wall of the vessel into space, then turned off the phase modification and thumped on the hull with a fist, just to see if it worked. It did – he could feel the impact, although in the vacuum there was no sound. “Good news is the dematerializing function seems to work perfectly,” he said.

“Keep in mind that maintaining the decoherence requires power,” the Vision warned him. “Whenever possible, you could keep in...”

“There!” Dr. Foster exclaimed. “At the back of the second-largest one!”
Tony raised his head, then flew up above Brisingr to a vantage point from which he could see the rest of the vessels. “FRIDAY, gimme the infra-red back.”

The heat map reappeared, and sure enough, on the back of the sphere was a very bright area indeed, one that had been hidden from Tony as he'd moved down the line of spacecraft from front to back. It was tiny compared to the enormous size of the ships, but from this angle it couldn't be missed. Tony moved towards it.

“How did you even see that?” he asked. The feed showed only what the HUD did. How could she have found it with the infra-red turned off?

“I was looking at some of the pictures from Oracle,” Dr. Foster explained, “and I noticed a shiny spot that didn't look like metal. I zoomed in as much as I could, and it looked like glass to me, or something equivalent. Pandora doesn't need windows. If there's a life form on board, that's where it is.”

“Well done,” said Tony. He turned the infra-red off again to see if he could spot it, and found that not only was there a heat source, there was now a light on. He zoomed in with the optics and saw an elliptical window, with a humanoid shape silhouetted against it. Was that Tiresias? If so, she was in for a surprise.

“I assume you're listening, Pandora,” Tony said out loud. “Ready or not, here I come!” He phased out again, fired the thrusters, and passed right through both the window and the being on the other side of it.

There was a terrified cry, and Tony saw a silver shape hit the floor, arms over its head. A voice spoke, talking in a foreign language full of clicks and buzzes and squeals that sounded more like radio static than anything that could be written out in an Earthly alphabet. Tony phased back in and landed on the floor. The thick atmosphere was like moving underwater. As if in slow motion, Tony reached to take the wrist of the prone silver creature, and dragged her, none too gently, to her feet. So this was Tiresias.

She was about five feet tall, and rather androgynous – her bony figure was just barely feminine, and her face could have belonged to a young teenager of either sex. By human standards she looked malnourished, with ribs and hipbones prominent, but maybe that was just how Brisings were built. At first she looked very much indeed like a small silver human, but then Tony began to notice little details that made her more alien. Her hands resembled a chameleon's, having five fingers but with the first two opposed against the last three. Her bare feet were similarly arranged, with long toes that looked capable of gripping. Her hair was glassy, as if it were made of obsidian, and her large yellow eyes had an oval for a pupil and no visible sclera. They looked like they should have belonged to a fish, or even to a reptile, but they were full of very human terror.

Tony's anger at this being fought with his compassion for her fear, and it took him a moment to find a compromise between the two. He loosened Prometheus' grip on her wrist, but not enough that she could escape from him.

“Hello, Tiresias,” he said.

She didn't answer – of course not, she didn't speak English – but from somewhere else came a series of shrieking and clicking noises, like a dolphin trying to speak Xhosa, followed incongruously by the smooth English accent Pandora had adopted for speaking to humans.

“Greetings, Tony Stark,” the computer said.
“Hi, Pandora,” he replied, not taking his eyes off Tiresias. “I'm surprised you didn't say something to me sooner.”

“I asked if I could, but Tiresias forbid it,” Pandora said. “I did watch you very closely as you studied the Cargo. Tiresias ordered me to destroy your drone, but by that time you were so close I could not have done so without damage to our vessels. Thank you for not touching anything.”

So Pandora and Tiresias didn't agree on everything, and Pandora knew of ways to wiggle around her pilot's orders if she wanted to. That was interesting, and potentially useful. “You're welcome,” said Tony. “Sorry to barge in like this, but you weren't answering your calls, and we got worried. It's a little far out to have the cops do a welfare check, so I had to improvise.”

“Tiresias told me to end all contact with Earth and Asgard,” Pandora said. “I am allowed to speak to you now, but only to tell you to go away and not harm her.”

“I won't hurt her,” said Tony. “I just want to talk to her. You two have been keeping an awful lot of secrets, and that's no way to make a good impression on the folks you want to sublet a planet from.”

“I'm under orders not to talk to you about certain things.” For whatever it was worth, Pandora sounded like this upset her. “Tiresias believes that if you knew our history, you would become a danger to the Cargo.”

“That's fine,” said Tony. “You're just doing what you're told, and I don't want to hear it from you, anyway.” He looked back into Tiresias' reptilian yellow eyes. “I want to hear it from her.”

After her last conversation with Pandora, Tiresias had worked through the night and into the next day. She'd stopped a couple of times for a half-hour's nap or a bite to eat, but only to make Pandora stop bothering her about it. Now she was back at it, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor surrounded by drawings, displays, and maps in both hard and digital copies, and sucking on a stimulant lozenge that she wasn't sure was doing anything for her. Most likely the only thing keeping her going at this point was increasing desperation. So far, she hadn't found a way to defeat the Many Voices that would be acceptable to both herself and Pandora.

_Mother_, said Pandora, _another object from Earth is approaching us._

Tiresias had no more patience for such things. “Destroy it,” she said.

_I would prefer to determine its purpose first_, Pandora said in a tone equivalent to a sigh. _May I commu..._

“No,” Tiresias interrupted. She took a sip of liquid to help the stimulant dissolve in her mouth. “Determine its purpose and then destroy it.” They had more than enough things to worry about without these humans throwing more technology at them. There had to be a way to do this. There _had_ to.

A few minutes went by.

_It's inspecting the Cargo_, Pandora announced.

Her tone was so casual that it didn't seem to match what she'd actually said, and it took a moment before Tiresias got to her feet in horror. An alien object looking at the Cargo ought to be a cause for Pandora to panic, not to quietly observe. Was she malfunctioning? “What do you mean, inspecting the Cargo?” Tiresias asked.
A hologram appeared in front of her, showing the interior of one of the ark ships. Some sort of machine, humanoid but barely more than a scaffolding, seemed to be staring at the germinating seeds.

If Pandora wouldn't panic, then Tiresias would. “Get it out of there!” she ordered. “Destroy it!” She could feel her veins throbbing as her pulse sped up. She'd known it – she'd known than any inhabitants in this system would end up being a danger to them...

I can't destroy it when it's inside the ship, Pandora pointed out, unruffled. Besides, if you watch carefully, you will see that it appears to be out of phase with the matter of the vessel and Cargo. She rotated the hologram and enlarged a place where the limbs of the machine overlapped with and moved right through the equipment, which kept running as if nothing were happening. Anyway, it's not damaging anything. I suspect it is only a probe to satisfy curiosity.

The machine turned, slipped out by passing right through the solid hull, and was gone.

Tiresias waved the hologram aside and opened the shutters on her compartment's small window. This hadn't been open since Pandora had woken her – there was nothing to see outside but debris and the rest of the train of ships, pockmarked by their trip across the cosmos. Now she rolled it aside, and squinted out at the darkness. “Where is it?” They needed to know what this object would be doing next.

Not visible from this angle, said Pandora. Then, a moment later, there it is.

A holographic circle appeared around a bright point hovering next to the vessel directly behind Tiresias, but no detail was visible. She pressed her face to the window as it began to grow brighter.

I would advise you to duck, Mother, Pandora said.

By the time Tiresias realized that the intruder was coming right at her, it was too late. She cried out in terror and hit the floor, trying in the split second available to prepare herself for the window to break, for the incomprehensible cold of space, for the atmosphere to be torn from her lungs... but none of those things happened. Instead, something grabbed her wrist and dragged her upright, and she found herself looking her visitor in the face.

It was a foot taller than her, and despite being little more than a skeleton its build was barrel-chested and broad-shouldered. It was made of unpainted metal and, despite having passed right through the window a moment ago, it now seemed very solid indeed, with a powerful grip. Its face was little more than a blank mask with a pair of glowing blue slits for eyes.

“Help me!” she begged Pandora. “Tell it to let me go!”

Oh, so now I'm allowed to speak to it? Pandora asked. She was clearly annoyed, but she did passe on the message in a series of flat barking sounds, like air being forced through a hose. The intruding machine wheezed something back at her, and the grip on Tiresias' wrist slackened, but did not break.

He doesn't want to talk to me, said Pandora. He wants to talk to you.

“To me?” asked Tiresias – and yet, she really wasn't surprised somehow. Despite all her efforts, they'd somehow found out she existed. Therefore, they wanted to know more about her. That made perfect sense.

I will translate, Pandora promised. Please talk to him, Mother. Think of what we have to gain.

Tiresias could still only think of what they were about to lose – but the machine let go of her arm and
stepped back, arms folded and foot tapping impatiently.

There was nothing she could do now, Tiresias realized. She had nowhere to hide. This thing could pass through the thick hulls of the vessels – it could follow her anywhere. Any attempt to destroy it in here would damage the Cargo, and Pandora wouldn’t allow that. The only escape was suicide, and Pandora wouldn’t stand for that, either... so she had to talk.

“What do you want to know?” she asked the intruder.

The machine replied, and Pandora presented her with the answer, in what must have been an approximation of the thing’s voice in her language. “For a start,” it said, “why did your AI tell us there were only embryos on this ship, when you’re here?”

That was a silly question, so Tiresias gave him a silly answer. “Because I didn't want you to know about me, obviously.”

The machine stepped towards her again, and despite its lack of structure, there was menace in its every move. “I didn't send this contraption twelve billion kilometres so that you could play games with me,” it said. “So let's try that again.”

Tiresias wilted, the last glimmer of rebellion gone. “If you knew I was here, you would want to know why,” she said. “And if you knew why, you would kill me, and destroy the entire expedition.” that was the inevitable outcome of this conversation. She was going to have to accept that.

“Why?” asked the machine. “What's so terrible? What happened in your galaxy that you can't live there anymore and you had to come all this way to colonize our planet next door?”

Tiresias sat down in her cocoon. “There's no life in Andromeda,” she said. “I killed it all.”

“How could she possibly explain? The only place to start was... was at the beginning, wasn't it? “My people discovered the Mind Gem by accident, thousands of years ago,” Tiresias said. “We used it as a power source. With its energy we could enhance our own telepathic and telekinetic abilities, travel in space, and rule half our galaxy. But I was the one who figured out how to use it to create artificial intelligence.” She raised her head a little, still proud of that accomplishment despite all its awful consequences. “It was going to be a new era. Technology would be able to design and improve *itself* beyond our wildest dreams.”

The machine bobbed its head. “We call that singularity,” it said. “The technological event horizon. Everything changes and human intelligence is no longer relevant.”

“Exactly,” Tiresias said. “It scared people. They thought there'd be no more need for *living* intelligence with these computers around, so... I tried to make something for *them*. I thought if I'd used the Mind Gem to create the ultimate machine, I could also use it to create the ultimate *mind*.”

She took a deep breath. “We'd already tapped the Mind Gem to improve our extrasensory communication, so I expanded on that to build a sort of telepathic database – a sum of all knowledge contained in all sentient biological minds across the galaxy, which anyone could access. Through this collective knowledge, *people* would continue to be smarter and better than our computers.”

“It went wrong,” said the machine.

“I called it...” Tiresias swallowed. “I called it the Suckling, the Milk-Drinker sometimes, because it was my baby,” she said sadly. “Its proper name, the one I used in front of others, was the Many
Voices.”

“It destroyed you.” This wasn't a question, and the fact that whatever intellect inhabited this thing appeared to consider this inevitable made Tiresias want to curl up in her cocoon and never come out. How could she possibly have failed to foresee it?

“It was meant to help people,” she said, hanging her head. “But once minds went into it, they didn't come out. It assimilated every intelligence it encountered and left the bodies empty shells, and grew bigger and smarter until it folded itself inside a pocket in space where nobody could get at it. It was leaving me for last, because it wanted me to watch. It wanted me to see what I'd created. I managed to trick it into giving up the Mind Gem, and I used that to make one last computer...” She reached out and put a hand on the wall, as she would one have put it on a loved one's skin to make telepathic contact, but of course there was nothing there. Pandora was only a machine. “And I took what I could salvage of my world and ran away. I wanted it to think I'd killed myself and it was alone in the galaxy, but I should have known I couldn't fool it twice.”

There was a very long silence, long enough for Tiresias to start wondering whether something had gone wrong with the machine in front of her. Eventually she couldn't take it anymore and raised her eyes to look at it.

Then it spoke. “Is this what's following you?”

We don't know for certain, said Pandora.

“Probably,” said Tiresias. She shut her eyes again. “Without the Mind Gem it can't assimilate at a distance. It needs to touch. So it'll come to a planet and roll around it, consuming every mind in its path. Not just people, but animals... anything that can be said to think.” Anything her own mind had once been able to touch.

“That's all it needs,” said the machine grimly. “Take out a few keystone species and the ecosystems collapse within days. Is that what this thing wants? To eat up other intelligences?”

“I think it wants me,” Tiresias said. “I created it to link all intelligent life in Andromeda. It consumed all intelligent life in Andromeda, except me.”

“So once it's got you, it might just wander off back home and leave us alone,” the machine said. “Give me one good reason, then, why we shouldn't just toss you into the Sarlaac pit.”

Tiresias didn't know what that meant, but it didn't matter – she could tell what the machine was getting at. “I can't,” she said. “It's no more than I deserve. I should have to suffer what billions of others suffered because of me. I would ask you to spare the ark, but I'm not sure if you can. It might want that, too. That's life from Andromeda.”

Again, there was silence. Tiresias did not dare to look again. She couldn't bear the cold blue of the thing's eyes... and its featureless 'face' would not have betrayed anything in any event.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked finally.

“No,” said the machine. “No, if what you've just told me is true, then we need you alive. We need your help.”

Tiresias raised her head, frowning in confusion.

The machine reached out, and she winced, expecting a blow. Instead, however, it put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You made a mistake,” it said. “You built something that got
away from you. It happens. Now we need to stop worrying about that and focus on fixing the problem before it gets any worse.”

“Yes,” she said, “but I haven't been able to figure out…”

“Then we'll help you figure,” it interrupted. “Do you know who we are? Has Pandora told you?”

“No,” Tiresias said. “I don't even know who you are.”

He replied, but Pandora seemed uncertain how to translate it, and had to take a few moments to think. His name, she said finally, is a corrupted amalgamation of several of his world's languages. I believe it means 'Strength Without Measure'. This probe is neither autonomous nor intelligent. It is being remotely controlled by one of the Earthlings. I spoke to him about some of our scientific knowledge before you cut us off.

Names were important. Pandora was The Giver of All Good Things because she would nurture an entire planet and give it what it needed to get started, including care, medicine, and education. Tiresias herself was The Bearer of Ill Tidings because that was what she'd turned out to be – she'd had another name once, but it was no longer relevant. If this being were Strength Without Measure... maybe that was a hopeful sign.

Strength Without Measure was not the machine's only way of identifying itself, though. “I'm an Avenger,” it continued. “Our job is to save the world – or, failing that, to avenge it. Since you know more about this thing that's coming than we do, you can help us with both. Do you want to clean up the mess you made?”

“I can't,” she protested. There was no way to undo the damage she'd done, not now. She'd barely managed to save the life of one planet. Countless millions hadn't been so lucky.

“Well, you can at least stop it from getting any bigger,” the machine said.

Half an hour ago, Tiresias had been trying to figure out how to do just that, and on the point of giving up. But how could she refuse now, when one of the creatures she'd put in such terrible danger was telling her it needed her help? Maybe it was just knowing that they did need help. Or maybe it was that she knew so little about the Earthlings – maybe they really could think of something she hadn't. They were certainly starting from a very different place in their very biology. Maybe that would give them insights not available to her. Whatever the reason, Tiresias suddenly felt something come to life inside her. She'd begun to work at Pandora's request, but had believed she would fail. Now she at least wanted to believe that she might not.

“I'll try,” she said.

“Try not.” It wagged a finger at her. “Do. Or do not. There is no try.”

Tiresias stood up. “I'll do it.” Looking up, she gave orders to Pandora: “re-open communications with Earth and Asgard.”

With pleasure, said Pandora.

It was a very proud Tony Stark who appeared on Good Day New York at seven AM the next morning, announcing to the world that talks between humanity and the Brisings were back on. With his hair tidy and makeup to hide the dark circles under his eyes, nobody would guess how late he'd been up the previous night, or the frightening subjects he and Tiresias had discussed. He was all smiles as he reassured the people of Earth that they were not under attack. Brisingr was still over fifty
times Earth's distance from the sun, and would not even be visible to the naked eye until late in September.

He also told a lie – a little white lie, to stop people from worrying.

“Are you saying, Mr. Stark,” said Rosanna Scotto, “that the communications cutoff was an *accident*?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying,” Tony replied smoothly. “Brisingr's swept up a lot of interplanetary debris on its trip, and a chunk of that took out the high-gain antenna they were using. Pandora only saw it coming with seconds to spare, so her 'see you later' was pretty abrupt. We explained to her that it didn't go over well, and she says she'll try to be more polite.”

“So the whole situation was just blown out of proportion,” said Scotto, referring to the protests and turmoil.

“Yes, that's all,” said Tony with a confident smile. “They've repaired their antenna, we're talking again, and representatives of the human race are welcome to stop by and say hello to our visitors. In fact, we're trying to get Pandora a callsign, so that ham radio operators can greet her... might be a while before they get their cards, though,” he added. “There's no mail service from Pluto.”

People watching the show might have noticed that Tony was far more cheerful now than he'd been last time he'd announced that they were talking to Brisingr, but neither Scotto nor Kelly said anything about it. He couldn't have answered if they'd asked him the reason, anyway. There were things here that the public couldn't know yet, and hopefully would never have to. The irony of that was not lost on Tony – here they were, still keeping secrets with the best intentions, and perhaps blithely paving their own road to hell. It was a risk they'd have to take.

On the drive back to Avengers HQ, as trees and fence posts flickered by outside, Tony found himself wondering what he would have done in Tiresias' place. What if Ultron had somehow managed to destroy the Earth, saving Tony for last so he could watch? In all likelihood, he would have done the very thing Tiresias had – fly away into space to escape his mistakes, and find some other planet where he could sit and stew in self-pity. And if he'd then found out Ultron had followed him, trying to fulfill a mission that could not be complete as long as Tony was alive...

He didn't know. He really didn't. If it had gotten to that point, Tony suspected he would have simply given up. If there were nobody left to save but himself, he wouldn't have seen the point. But that didn't mean he was going to let Tiresias think like that.

John Bradford, watching a man led to the hangman's noose, was supposed to have said *there but for the grace of God go I*. Tony was not a religious man by any stretch of the imagination. Matter was matter, and spirit was something people invented because it made them feel better. The sun was quite capable of rising, sparrows of falling, and people of screwing themselves over beyond all reason, without any sort of divine intervention. It wasn't God who'd saved Tony from sharing Tiresias' fate, it was nothing but damned good luck, and he had to wonder what he'd had that she hadn't.

The only answer he could come up with was team-mates. Tony had the Avengers, and together they'd taken on a challenge no individual could have risen to. Now he could pass that piece of luck on to Tiresias. He and the others could help her save herself from her mistakes, as long as she didn't give up.

Dr. Foster and Thor were waiting when he returned to HQ, and he smiled at them as he hung up his jacket. “You like my speech?” he asked. “Pepper helped write it.” She'd sent him a draft by email from Vienna.
“I've heard worse,” said Dr. Foster. “I did notice you never actually admitted you were wrong.”

Tony frowned. “Excuse me? What was I wrong about?”

“You thought the Brisings were dangerous,” Dr. Foster reminded him.

“They are,” said Tony with a firm nod. “They're more dangerous than I ever imagined. The difference is, now we know enough about why to do something about it.”
Chapter Notes

I'm sorry I've been so sporadic with updating. Would you believe me if I said it's because I've been in bed with pneumonia?

It took a few hours to gather up everybody involved, but that evening they all sat down to burgers and fries around two folding tables in the console room, for a somewhat more honest and in-depth discussion of the situation than Tony had given the press. Dr. Foster and the Vision were there, of course, as was Thor. Rhody, Wanda, and Steve sat in, and Dr. Foster's friends seemed to be hanging around – Dr. Selvig because he was interested, and Miss Lewis... probably, Tony decided, because she was bored. The communication lines were open, so Pandora and Tiresias could listen in and contribute. This was going to be a group effort.

“All right,” said Tony, “so now we know what we're up against – the Andromedan Borg, hiding inside a black hole of their own creation.”

“Not a black hole,” Dr. Foster interrupted. “If it were a black hole, they'd be crushed inside it.” She stood up and activated a hologram. “Based on the information Pandora sent to me this afternoon, it seems to be a thin sheet of severely warped space wrapped around... whatever this entity is. It produces the same lensing effect as a powerful gravitational field, but anything inside it would feel no gravity at all.” The hologram displayed a bubble with light from background galaxies bent around it. Within the bubble were several red and blue dots, bouncing around at random.

Dr. Foster went on. “Now that I know how it's put together, I can figure out how far away it is,” she said. “It's hanging around about five times further out than Brisingr, which corresponds to what Pandora describes as the 'blind spot' created by their own singularity. We're going with the theory that it's there on purpose so Pandora and Tiresias won't be able to see it, so we have to assume that any time it wants to catch up, it can. The ability to warp space means it's not even limited by the speed of light if it doesn't want to be.”

Tony couldn't help but notice Thor's proud smile as Dr. Foster spoke. It was the same expression Tony had worn when he'd had Pepper's Wired cover framed and hung in his office, or while watching her commencement speech at Bernard College. That's my girl. Isn't she amazing?

“So we know where it is,” said Rhody, “and we've got some idea what it is. That's progress.”

“We also know what it's called,” the Vision said. He looked towards the console, as if Tiresias were physically present there. “What were the names you gave it?”

“The Many Voices” Tiresias replied. “In private, I called in the Milk-Drinker.” Pandora had given her mistress an American accent, Tony noticed. Was that meant to match his own? Did Pandora assume that Earth's artificial intelligence was British, while humans were American? It was an amusing thought.

The Vision nodded. “According to the naming conventions we've observed so far, we might call it either Galactus or Polyphemus,” he suggested.
“Polyphemus was the cyclops, wasn't he?” Dr. Foster asked. “The one who ate anybody he found on his island?”

“That seems appropriate,” Tony agreed. “Polyphemus, then.”

Giving the thing a name seemed to solidify it somehow, to make the threat more real. Suddenly, people looked scared – Dr. Foster certainly did, and Dr. Selvig was playing with a piece of paper, twisting it into a rope. Rhodey distractedly tapped his fingers on the table. Steve looked tired more than anything else, as if he couldn't believe this was happening again. Maybe Tony should have felt the same, but he didn't. He felt encouraged. They'd been here. They'd done this. They'd played this level before and they'd beaten it. Polyphemus differed from Ultron only in scale.

“So since we don't have a sharp stick or any sheep,” Tony said. “who has suggestions?”

“I do,” Tiresias offered.

Her voice was nervous, shaking slightly, and Tony wondered if that were fear or just social awkwardness. Before Tony had rudely barged into her room within Brisingr, how long had it been since she'd last spoken to anybody but Pandora? Even if Tony didn't count the five million years she'd spent in hibernation, how much time had gone by between the apocalypse in Andromeda and Tiresias finishing her ark? She'd looked young to Tony, but who knew what her species' standards were, or how long they lived? It could have been decades, even centuries.

“Polyphemus is intelligent – far more so than I am – and self-aware,” Tiresias said. “I've communicated with it in the past. Pandora says there's a telepath among you. Perhaps she could speak to it.”

“No,” the Vision said, almost before Tiresias was finished speaking.

“I might be able to,” said Wanda. “If I had some help in...”

“No,” the Vision repeated, putting his hand over hers.

Tony had to think for a moment about how to respond. He'd thought he understood Tiresias, but now he wondered if they had less in common than he'd believed. “You mean... we'll just ask it politely to go away?” Tiresias had talked about Polyphemus as if it were utterly unstoppable, and she should have known what she was talking about – yet she wanted them to talk to it?

“We tried to talk to Ultron,” Wanda said. “It did no good.”

“But we did try,” Steve observed.

“Not to ask it to go away,” said Tiresias. “Just to find out what it wants. I... I've been thinking a great deal since we spoke last. Even before that. I'm not sure how to destroy Polyphemus in a way that would be acceptable to all of us, but I believe it wants me. Maybe we can come to an agreement, whereby I sacrifice myself to save the ark, and your work.”

Tony could not, of course, see her face, but her tone was perfectly serious. She thought she could save them by letting it eat her. That would be giving up, and he wasn't going to let her give up.

Neither, apparently, was Thor. “We won't have you commit suicide,” he said. “I do agree, however, that we should make some attempt to talk to this entity.”

Tony's frown deepened. “Am I hearing this correctly?” he asked.
“We do not know what Polyphemus wants,” said Thor. “The Avengers do not fight a foe until we are certain we cannot reason with them. Captain Rogers and yourself asked Loki to stand down in Stuttgart, and only took him into custody when he refused. You fought back against me because you believed I had attacked you without provocation.”

“We did the same with Ultron,” Steve pointed out. “We went looking for him in South Africa to talk to him. We didn't fight back until he and the twins attacked us first.”

“This Polyphemus deserves the benefit of the same doubt,” Thor said firmly.

“We're all talking about the same creature, right?” asked Rhodey. “The one who already ate a galaxy?”

“I'm glad somebody here is sane,” Tony said with a nod. “What he said.”

“I get that,” said Steve. “But the person who knows this thing best is Tiresias, and she's the one saying we should talk to it. We've got enough time before it arrives that we can do some experimenting. If nothing else, maybe we'll learn something that'll help later.”

“Or maybe we'll just be waving a big flag that says munchy-crunchy brains right here, come and get 'em!” said Tony. “Who would be doing this talking, anyway? We've already decided not Wanda.”

“I've seen visions of annihilation before,” Wanda said. “I'm sure I will see more.”

“We won't ask that of you,” the Vision told her. “Reaching out to Tiresias before nearly killed you.”

“I was carrying the weight of two minds,” Wanda reminded him.

“Yes, but you would have to carry your own much further,” said the Vision. He turned to the console. “Tiresias, didn't you say that your people have some innate telepathic ability?”

“We do...” Tiresias said uncertainly, “but for centuries we'd been boosting it with the energy of the Mind Gem. Children were given tokens charged with it when they were ready to begin training. I... I don't know if I'd be able to do it without such a token. I've never tried.” She sounded embarrassed, as if she were admitting that she'd never learned to ride a bicycle without training wheels.

“If you can tell us how to make this token, I'm sure we can provide you with a substitute,” the Vision offered.

“There is no substitute,” she said. “You would need the Gem.”

That was the moment when Tony realized he was still just a little upset about the things Dr. Foster and the Vision had hidden from him, because it was deeply satisfying to realize they hadn't told Pandora everything, either. Of course they hadn't. Tiresias wouldn't have trusted them for a minute if she'd known. The best intentions, paving that road to hell.

“Didn't they tell you,” Tony asked sweetly. “The Mind Gem is right here.”

“You kept it?” Tiresias was horrified.

“It is safe,” said Thor quickly. “The Vision is its caretaker, and he is worthy of the task.”

“It can't be destroyed,” Tony pointed out. “And throwing it away didn't work so well for you guys.”

“It's safe now,” Tiresias said, “but what if somebody finds it?”
“I wouldn't allow that,” the Vision assured her. “My mind is tied to the stone, and I have some use of its power, but I am programmed to act only in the interests of preserving life. Tell us what you need to communicate with Polyphemus, and we will give it to you.”

Tiresias was quiet for a very long time, long enough that Tony started to think she'd cut them off again. In that case, wouldn't she say so, like last time? Finally, however, she said, “I hoped I'd never have to do that again, but really, I'm the only one who can.”

She now sounded resolute, and there was something in the simulated voice that gave Tony an awful premonition. Those words, *I'm the only one who can*, were exactly how he'd felt just before tossing a nuclear bomb into a wormhole a mile above Manhattan. He was the only one who could do this, so he had to do it and die trying. *And*. There was no *or*. In the end he'd lived to tell about it, but only because of some astonishing good luck. Tiresias really did mean to sacrifice herself, and she might just succeed.

Tiresias sent them a series of complicated diagrams explaining how to build the device she would need. Stark and Vision spent a few days assembling things, while other people drifted in and out of the workshops, checking on them or on the work. Jane herself spent a lot of time in the console room, downloading and working with Pandora's astronomical data.

She was in there the afternoon Captain Rogers arrived with a package of photographs. “Here they are,” he said, going to the table where Stark and the Vision were working and starting to spread them out. “Romanov found them. These are the machines Zola used during the war to get power out of the tesseract.”

“They're huge,” Stark said, looking at the sleek little machine they'd been working on.

“Given the state of technology in the 1940s, that's not surprising,” said the Vision. “You can see that they're designed to do the same thing – channel and focus the energy of the Infinity Stone into a form that can be stored in a crystal.”

“Zola used quartz,” said Captain Rogers.

“Natural? I'm surprised it didn't blow up in his face,” Stark snorted.

“I'm told that a couple of times it did,” Captain Rogers said.

“No danger of that here,” Stark promised. “Over there in the pressure chamber we've got a nice piece of silicon carbide growing, which will be mounted in an adamantium housing. Just like Loki's scepter, Tiresias will never need to be in direct contact with the energy.”

Jane realized she was eavesdropping, and turned to face her computer screen again. They wanted to avoid direct contact, she thought, because they knew direct contact with an Infinity Stone had killed the Red Skull. It hadn't killed Jane, though, nor had it killed Tiresias – because Jane was absolutely sure that whatever Tiresias had done to create this Polyphemus thing must have involved *some* kind of intimate contact with the Mind Gem. That was why all this was happening in the first place, why the gem was here waiting when Tiresias arrived, because the two of them were entangled.

It all meant that Jane had a lot to think about as the work went on. One particularly unpleasant idea kept nagging at her.

“Thor,” she said over dinner that night, “the Quantum Pots work because they're entangled with each other. If you don't want one anymore, is there a way to break that bond?”
“Yes,” he replied, “but you must melt down the cauldron and mix it with other metals. If you scatter the particles widely enough, the effect weakens and disappears.”

That was more or less the answer Jane had expected. She nodded, chewing slowly on her mouthful of quinoa. It was only since staying at Avengers HQ that she’d realized the word was pronounced KEEN-wa instead of quinn-OH-a.

“Why do you ask?” Thor wanted to know.

“Oh, I was just wondering what's going to happen with things like Oracle and Prometheus when I get my Pot back,” Jane lied. “It would be weird if every time I tried to call you, we had Pandora and Tiresias listening in.”

“The satellite and drone will probably burn up in the atmosphere of Venus, or Stark will bring them back to Earth to dismantle and re-use,” Thor said. “The Cauldron ought to function as before.” He put down his coffee cup and reached across the table for her hand. “That isn't what you were wondering, though.”

“No, it isn't,” Jane admitted with a heavy sigh. “Do you think Tiresias can help me with what I really want to know?” She doubted it – if Tiresias could change that, none of this would have been happening.

“It's possible,” said Thor. “The universe has secrets beyond even the wisdom of Asgard. Maybe the Brisings will have an answer for you.” He sounded grim, though, as if he didn't believe that any more than Jane did. She squeezed his fingers.

“No harm in asking, I guess,” she said.

She waited until the middle of the night, when everybody else was asleep or at least working elsewhere, and then crept into the console room. Her fuzzy monster foot slippers made soft slapping sounds against the tiles. The room was full of half-finished equipment, and the interface for Prometheus was glowing softly in a corner. Stark had kept the robot gliding along through space with the train of ships so that he could use it again if he needed it. Oracle was still up there, too, bringing in enough new data on the outer solar system to keep astronomers busy for years. It was great that they were learning so much, but for almost the first time in her life, Jane was starting to wonder if the price of the knowledge were too high.

Jane was glad Tiresias couldn't see her as she sat down at the console. She supposed an alien couldn't tell and probably didn't care whether she were dressed in pajamas or in Phillip Lim and Miu Miu, but it made her feel slightly more confident. Better than shouting at Stark and then realizing she was dressed as Cookie Monster, anyway.

“Tiresias?” she asked. “Are you awake?”

The reply came from Pandora instead. “She is. I've been trying to synchronize her sleep schedule with yours, in order to facilitate communication, but it doesn't seem to be working.”

Tiresias was a scientist, Jane thought. She probably didn't sleep much anyway. Scientists, Jane included, had too much trouble shutting down their thinking. On any given night, Jane was likely to sit up two or three times to make notes in her phone or on paper, just to get thoughts out of her head so she could relax and sleep properly. “Well, I'm not sleeping, either,” she said. “I'd like to ask her some questions about the Infinity Stones.”

“I will inform her,” said Pandora in a resigned voice.
While she waited, Jane wondered what the inside of Brisingr really looked like. She'd gotten to see some of it through the feed from Prometheus, but the drone had only visited two tiny parts of the entire vast caravan. Did Tiresias have more living space? Could she move from vessel to vessel? What tools, what sensors did they have? There would have to be something to map the local gravitational field, so that they could use that gravity pulse generator of theirs properly, and to have created the map of dark matter they'd already given her. Jane would have to ask. There were still so many things she wanted to ask, it would probably take a lifetime just to articulate them all.

“Who's there?” Tiresias asked warily.

Jane sat up straight. “Dr. Jane Foster,” she replied. “We spoke before, but only when I was part of the group. I'm the astronomer,” she added, hoping Tiresias would remember her. “The one who first noticed you guys coming.”

“Oh, yes.” Tiresias' voice remained nervous. “What do you want to know? I don't know the other stones,” she warned, “only the Mind Gem. We knew there had to be others – our physicists predicted that six were necessary for the universe as we see it – but we never encountered them.”

Six were necessary? That seemed like support for Jane's theory of the stones as quantum forces, but she couldn't let herself get distracted. Not from this. “I need to know,” she said, “when you were making Polyphemus, or when you were making your computers, you must have had actual contact with the Mind Gem, right?”

“I worked... very closely with it,” Tiresias hedged. “Probably more closely than I should have. But we had machines to tap its energy while protecting the users from the effects.”

She didn't want to admit it. Jane couldn't blame her. It wasn't a nice thing to remember. “I've touched one,” she said. “The Reality Gem – the Asgardians call it the Aether. I was its host for a couple of days.”

Suddenly Jane wished she and Tiresias could see one another, because Tiresias seeing her Tsum-Tsum pajamas would have been worth it to see the expression on the alien's face. “A couple of days?” Tiresias asked, astonished. “You survived?”

“I think it didn't want to kill me,” Jane said. “I was a means for it to get back to its previous master. Thing is, the Mind Gem is the fourth Infinity Stone we've heard about in just the last few years. There's the Aether, the Tesseract, which is the Space Gem, and the Power Gem is out there somewhere, Asgard felt the echoes from somebody trying to use it. Thor's worried that they're gathering, or being gathered, and it looks like our planet is the focus of that.”

“Oh.” Tiresias whimpered. “Why here? The universe is so vast.”

“I wondered that, too,” said Jane, “but I have a theory.” She wondered how it would sound to Tiresias. Perhaps laughably simplistic, the way Earth's science sounded to Thor. “I think we're all entangled.” She explained what the word meant, and how it applied to the stones. “So this is all happening because the stones are gathering. The Mind Gem isn't here because you are, you're here because it is. Because you're all entangled.”

“I know, I know,” Tiresias said, as if this were all obvious to her. “But that can't be the answer. That's why we had the machines, to distance ourselves from the stone as we used it. I never touched it directly except...” she stopped in midsentence.

Jane leaned forward. As unpleasant as the situation and memories were, she was on the verge of being proven right, and that always made her heart beat faster. “Except?” she asked.
“Except for a split second, when I took it back from Polyphemus,” said Tiresias. “I had equipment ready to keep me from touching it, but I did... brush it, just for a moment. It... it felt like being electrocuted. I felt like it would tear me apart.”

Jane recalled the tingle that had passed over her skin when the Aether defended itself, first from the police in London and then from the guards in Asgard. She remembered the gnawing pain, like menstrual cramps but through her entire body, as it fed on her. Yes, that was what touching an Infinity Stone felt like.

“I didn't mean to, but I couldn't just let go,” Tiresias said. “I knew I was the only person who could do this, so I had to do it, and... so stupid!” she moaned. “It didn't kill me, so I thought I must have escaped it somehow, but all I did was ensure it would follow me to the ends of the universe!”

She sounded as if she desperately needed to be told that she wasn't an idiot. Fortunately, Jane knew just how to reassure her. “That's better than how I came into contact with the Aether,” she said. “I didn't know what it was. The Asgardians had sealed it in a trap like two big blocks of stone, and I could see all this black and red liquid bubbling up. I thought it was lava at first, but then I realized it wasn't hot, so I... I just poked it to find out what it was.” It really did sound stupid in retrospect. “It tried to use me... well, its master tried to use me. I don't know if you have Dark Elves where you come from, but Malekith used me as a vehicle to get the Aether back so that he could destroy Asgard with it. It didn't seem to hurt him.”

“We speculated about beings who would be able to wield the gems directly,” Tiresias said, “but we never met any. My people couldn't do it. I can't believe I was such an idiot.”

“Did you feel like the stone wanted anything?” Jane asked. “Was there someone else who was trying to get it back? Did it want you to use it? I could feel what Malekith wanted, because he was entangled with the Aether, too.”

“I don't think so,” said Tiresias. She was quiet for a moment. “No, I don't think so.”

Jane was pretty sure that anyone who had felt such a thing would not say I don't think so. That meant that the Mind Gem didn't have another master the way the Aether had Malekith... unless it was the Vision, but since his mind worked differently from a human one, perhaps it wasn't the same.

Time to get to the actual point.

“So.” Jane licked her lips. “Our physics doesn't know of any way to undo quantum entanglement once it occurs,” Jane said. “Neither do the Asgardians. Do you?”

“To un-entangle particles? You can't do that,” said Tiresias. “You can cheat the laws of physics sometimes, but you can't break them. Entanglement is... it's the source of entropy, it's part of the very nature of time. If you want to break your bond with the Aether, Dr. Foster... no, that will only happen when you die.”

Jane wondered what Tiresias was thinking in that moment. Was she pondering her own bond with the Mind Gem, and her own death as a way of ending that? If so, it was probably too late. Both the Gem and Polyphemus, likewise entangled with it, had already followed her all the way here.

“I didn't think so,” she said, “but thanks anyway.” Odin had said they had to keep the stones apart, but it didn't matter where the Aether was now, because it would always be tied to Earth, through Jane, and Earth was where the Mind Gem was. If Jane wanted to put more distance between the two, she would either have to leave Earth forever – and Asgard as well, since the Tesseract was kept there – or die. Her gut twisted at the thought, and her irrational mind insisted that there had to be another
The scientist in her, however, knew that there couldn’t be. The question now was where she could possibly go. Or, failing that, how to ensure that the atoms of her body were scattered across the cosmos, as Malekith’s had been by the convergence.

The day after that, the extraction machine was finished. It took up half a tabletop, with some pieces on the floor, and a frame for the Vision to fit his head into so that the Mind Gem would stay still during the process. Stark slid the crystal, secure in its adamantium housing, into a glass tube, then connected it to the device and threw a switch.

The actual extraction was rather anticlimactic. There was a short, sharp popping sound, the Vision winced, and the crystal lit up with yellow light. Stark turned the machine off again, and held up the tube.

“So this is what you need to be psychic, is it?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t recommend trying it,” said the Vision, getting to his feet. Jane had expected him to be shaky or drained, but he seemed perfectly normal. What was now in the token was only a miniscule fraction of a fraction of the energy in the Mind Gem. “A few humans have dormant psychic abilities, but it seems to be a very rare gene, even within families.” He glanced at Wanda. “Your brother did not have it, or he would have manifested the same powers as you.”

“I’d probably break something anyway,” Stark muttered. He slipped the tube with the token into an insulated box that would keep it safe on its long trip into space. The mission plan was for Prometheus to rendezvous with it as it approached Brisingr, and hand it off to Tiresias personally. “If it weren’t for the fact that somebody might use them, I’d be tempted to make a couple more of these, just so I can get a look at how the crystal structure binds the energy.”

“The problem is not so much that they might be used as that they’d have to be used,” the Vision observed. “Otherwise the energy would present a constant danger if its bond with the crystal should destabilize.”

“Or that,” Stark agreed.

Jane had sat silent through this conversation. Now that the show – such as it had been – was over, she grabbed her empty mug and got up to leave the room. Thor followed her into the hallway.

“You’ve been very quiet this week,” he observed.

“I’m trying to figure something out,” she replied with an awkward shrug. “You know how I get.”

Thor nodded. “Do you need the astrolabe again?”

“It’s not that kind of problem,” said Jane. “I’ll be okay.”

He took her hands between hers and calmly looked her in the face, leaving the question unspoken.

“I really will,” Jane lied. “I promise.”

It was no wonder that the Avengers seemed so pensive and unhappy most of the time, Jane thought as she returned to her room. Carrying the world on your shoulders was damned hard work – and it was a burden that, once lifted, could never be set down again.
His Master's Voice

The Earthlings were certainly clever at sending things into space. They had an excellent knowledge of the gravitational landscape of their solar system, with all its many planets and moons. While they could not generate or neutralize that gravity, they knew how to harness it to speed things on their way. It only took ten days for the token to arrive, presented to Tiresias by the robot its makers called Prior Consideration.

She was almost afraid to touch it. Now that the opportunity was at hand, Tiresias did long to end her self-made isolation... but solitary confinement was surely no more than what she deserved after what she'd done. Besides, she was terrified of what she might fine. This new galaxy had turned out to be home to forms of life she'd never even imagined. What might be going on in such minds?

But this had been her idea. She couldn't back down from it now. The token in the robot's skeletal hand didn't look much like the ones she remembered from her childhood – it was bigger and rougher-edged, and the motion visible within the glowing crystal suggested it was not fully stable. Tiresias' hand shook as she reached out and closed her fingers around it.

She had no immediate metaphor for what happened when she touched it, but a human might have likened it to putting on a pair of 3D glasses. The flat universe suddenly burst into a whole new dimension.

With the token in her hand, Tiresias could feel the planet up ahead. It had seemed ridiculous that there could be anything alive on a world that was so cold, so lacking in air and sulfur and all the other things she thought of as the basis of life, but there it was, overflowing with intelligence. There were billions of the humans, but they weren't alone. There were also huge, ancient beings in the oceans, singing poetry to each other across thousands of miles, and creatures deep within the earth that had no knowledge of the surface. It was breathtaking and, when she thought of Polyphemus finding this world and swallowing them all up, heartbreaking.

For a moment it was overwhelming, like a symphony after years of silence, but it soon settled into a soft background chorus from which one voice stood out. This belonged to a human, and it was thinking of her. Thinking of her strongly and deliberately, in fact, repeating the name the humans called her over and over, as if trying to reach out to her.

Tiresias made contact with it. Who are you? she asked.

The other was pleased, and offered a name. Wanda Maximoff, it said. The Vision told me you like to know what names mean. 'Wanda' means 'nomad' and 'Maximoff' is 'the most', so I am She Who Travels Furthest.

That was certainly a good name for a powerful telepath, although Tiresias was a little confused by the idea, which she saw in the undertones of thought behind the deliberate communication, that Wanda had not known what her name meant and had to do research to find out. What good was a signifier that meant nothing to the signified?

I'm the one who helped the Vision reach Pandora for their first contact, Wanda went on. If it's all right, I would like to remain in touch with you as you try to reach Polyphemus. I might be able to help you.

Tiresias doubted that. Wanda had no token to draw on, only the energy within her own body, nor did she have Tiresias' centuries of training and experience. But Tiresias reminded herself that she'd
underestimated the Earthlings before. Besides, Pandora would want her to take Wanda along.
Pandora would tell her Mother to accept whatever help was available.

*You may,* Tiresias decided, and brought herself back to the present moment. It had only been a few seconds since Prometheus had given her the token, and the robot and its operator were waiting for a response. “Thank you,” she said. “Could you give me my privacy now?”

“Of course,” said the voice of Anthony Stark, the robot-builder. “Let me know how it goes.”

“I will,” Tiresias promised. And if she died, Pandora would pass it on. “Goodbye.”

“See you,” said Prometheus, and vanished through the wall again.

Once he was gone, Tiresias curled up in her cocoon with the token clutched to her chest, and advised Wanda to do the same. *Lie down and make yourself comfortable. It will be very taxing for you.*

*I expect it will,* Wanda agreed, and showed Tiresias a glimpse of her astral journey with the Vision. It had drained her nearly to the point of collapse, but she'd still been able to sense the ship's occupant and her bubbling morass of terror. To Tiresias' surprise, what had made the greatest impression on her was not the fear, but the hope. Through the Vision's contact with Pandora, Wanda had seen the new, living world the ark was supposed to create, and it was because of that hope that she was reaching out to Tiresias now.

*The Vision says he is on the side of life, all life,* Wanda explained. *So am I. If you want to build a world, you'll have my help in whatever form I can offer it.* She gave Tiresias a glimpse of something else, then – a personal past in which Wanda had probed minds for their worst fears and induced people to destroy themselves or others. After causing terrible damage she had realized she'd been used by those who wanted power or annihilation, and she wanted no more of that. She wanted to heal now, not to harm.

*Thank you,* said Tiresias, and realized that she was rather touched. She had far more in common with these curious carbon creatures than she ever would have imagined. They were so very resilient, too – both Stark and Wanda seemed to have picked themselves up from their own horrible mistakes and gotten to work making amends. It gave Tiresias new hope that she could do that, too.

*I'm ready,* said Wanda, and showed herself lying on her back on a mattress, hands clasped over her abdomen and eyes closed.

*Then I will begin,* Tiresias replied. She shut her own eyes and reached out, feeling into the void as if blundering around in a dark room – it had been so long since she'd done this, she's almost forgotten how. With one part of her mind cradling Wanda, she slid back along Brisingr's path towards where Dr. Jane Foster had said Polyphemus might be. Even with the token it was a great distance, and she could feel the strain on her connection with Wanda.

*Relax,* she urged her. *Let me bear the load.*

There was nothing in space for billions upon billions of kilometres until, halfway to the edge of the Oort cloud, Polyphemus came suddenly looming up out of the darkness like a tsunami about to crash down on top of them. If they could have seen it, it would have looked like an immense and complicated crystal, forever folding and unfolding, with white fluid pulsing in its many facets – not unlike a token of an Infinity Stone – but nobody had seen it in millions of years. For the purposes of protection and travel it had folded itself within a thin sheet of space and time. Only the lensing effect was actually visible, but the aggregate mind within was there to be touched.
Tiresias had communicated with it before. When Polyphemus had been small and new, touching it had been no different from any other mind, but as it voraciously devoured and inexorably grew, contact had become more and more devastating. It was bigger, older, and smarter now, and a tentative brush against its consciousness made Tiresias gasp in pain.

It was as if her sinuses filled with hot liquid, as if something were burning her brain right out of her. Polyphemus was enormously bigger than she remembered, unfathomably intelligent and yet far less organized than it had ever been before. There’d been coherent thoughts in it once. Now it was only a seething mass of rage. It despised those little living things that went about their finite journeys, learning and loving, while it was nothing but a formless, immortal monster, always alone. Boiled with jealousy of them. Furious with the stupid creature who had created it. The emotions fed on themselves, as if Polyphemus were licking a wound that could only ever get deeper and more painful the more intelligence, the more consciousness it absorbed. Its own existence was driving it mad, and following her across the intergalactic void had given it plenty of time to go mad in.

When it felt Tiresias, its first reaction was to recoil in disgust. This was mother. This was the living thing it hated most, the one that had condemned it to be what it was. The one that had tricked it so it could not fulfill the very destiny she had created it for! It had followed her all this way to destroy her, and destroy her it would – after initially shrinking back, it greedily moved to surround her, delighted that she had thrown herself into its maw.

Perhaps it would once have been possible to reach an agreement with this thing, but no longer. There could be no bargain with such an uncompromising force. Tiresias fought to break the contact, but Polyphemus had wrapped invisible tentacles around her, holding her to it. Normally it would have had to touch her physically, but since she had come to it, it would try to absorb her right there, and Wanda with her. She curled protectively around the human's little mind.

If you want to help me, now is the time! she said. The only reply was a terrified whimper. I can't breathe! I can't breathe!

Then Polyphemus felt the token. Its grip slackened for a moment in surprise, and Tiresias broke away and hurled herself back into her body. The token dropped from her hand and rolled across the floor, drained dry – she'd sapped its power fighting Polyphemus had had to dip into her own reserves, leaving her weak and dizzy. For what might have been a moment, might have been an hour, might have been a thousand years she lay there with her eyes wide open, unable to stop shaking. Pandora was speaking to her, but she could not understand a word.

“I'm all right,” she said aloud, figuring that must be what the computer was asking. “I made it out. I'm all right.”

Sleep, said Pandora. You can analyze later.

For once Tiresias did not feel like fighting the suggestion. She shut her eyes, and was unconscious within moments. Even in her sleep, however, it was a very long time before she stopped trembling, or could breathe in anything but shuddering gasps.

In her room at Avengers HQ, Wanda Maximoff sat up screaming.

Everybody in the residential wing heard her. The Vision, whose hearing was better than a human's, heard her from clear across the compound. He was in the console room with Tony, Dr. Foster, and Dr. Selvig – Tony had handed the token over to Tiresias a few minutes ago, and was now using Prometheus to clean some cometary dust off Oracle's sensors. The Vision and Dr. Selvig had been
discussing the dark matter map, while Dr. Foster listened but did not contribute. The Vision thought that was odd. Dr. Foster usually had a lot to say, particularly about scientific investigations.

“What is it?” asked Dr. Selvig, noticing how the Vision's head perked up at the sound.

“It's Wanda,” he replied. “Excuse me.”

He flew a straight line across the entire compound, passing right through buildings, vehicles, and even people, and entered through the bedroom wall to find Wanda sitting bolt upright in bed, clutching her chest and panting with tears streaming down her cheeks. She looked as if she'd just woken from a nightmare, but it was eleven o'clock in the morning and the Vision knew she'd already been up for hours.

“Wanda. What happened?” He sat down on the bed and offered her a hand. She seized it with both of hers, applying a grip that seemed much stronger than her thin fingers should have been capable of.

“I contacted Tiresias,” she said. “I told her I wanted to go with her, to talk to Polyphemus.”

The Vision frowned. “I told you not to risk yourself again,” he said.

“And I told you, I don't need you to protect me!” she replied fiercely. “I chose to be an Avenger because I wanted to use my powers to help people! That's what I'm trying to do!”

He reached out to smooth her hair, hoping the touch would help, but she swatted his hand away.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Tiresias, she tried to touch the thing. It almost ate her, but then it stopped...” Wanda paused, and let go of the Vision's hand so she could rub her temples.

“Put your head between your knees,” he told her. “It will help get oxygenated blood to your brain.” Wanda was pale and drawn, although not so much as when she'd taken him to contact Pandora under her own power. This time she'd had Tiresias' mind and the token to support her. The Vision got up, intending to call for a medic if one were not already on the way.

“No!” She grabbed his shirt. “It stopped because it realized we have the Mind Gem! It could... taste, I think, taste the energy from the token you sent her. It still hates Tiresias, but before it does anything else it wants to get the Mind Gem back.” She pulled harder on the cloth. “It isn't coming for her anymore, it's coming for you!”

The Vision hesitated, then sat down again. He pushed Wanda's long hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ears, and this time she let him. “What will it do when it has me?” he asked.

“It will devour,” said Wanda. “Like it did in Andromeda. It won't need to touch things to suck them up anymore, it will simply eat every thinking thing in this galaxy at once! Then it'll move on to the next one, and the next... it hates living things, it's jealous of us, and it wants to snuff us all out. The more life it eats, the more it hates us!” She was shaking, fresh tears welling up in her eyes.

The Vision put his arms around her and held her against him, so that with her ear on his chest she would be able to hear the hum of his power source. It wasn't the same as a human heartbeat, but she seemed to find it comforting. She put her arms around his midsection, buried her face in the crook of his arm, and sobbed.

“I won't let it have me, then,” said the Vision. “I will have to go somewhere else.” Maybe Asgard... or maybe not. The Asgardians themselves said it was dangerous to keep the stones close together. Maybe they could recommend somewhere else, someplace within reach of the Bifrost, but where Polyphemus couldn't follow. If not in this universe, maybe in one of the other realms.
That made Wanda cling to him tighter for a moment, but then she loosed her grip and raised her head, moving to wipe her nose on her sleeve. The Vision stopped her, and instead pulled a kleenex from the box on the night stand. “Here you are.”

“Nais tuke,” she murmured, blowing her nose. “When I saw Ultron’s mind, through you, I thought that was terrible. This thing would crush Ultron like a fly.”

The Vision didn’t doubt it. “Did you see any weakness in it? Any way it could be destroyed?” There was no longer any question of talking to Polyphemus. It was clearly not a talking sort of entity.

“It was created by an Infinity Stone,” said Wanda. “It can be destroyed by one. But the only one we have...” she raised her head to meet the Vision’s eyes, and then her gaze flickered upward, to the gem in his forehead.

“Is the one it wants to take,” the Vision finished for her.

After the Vision left to see Wanda, Jane and Eric sat and studied the dark matter map for a while. Jane could tell that Eric was waiting for her to say something, but she had no idea what to say. She’d lost track of the conversation half an hour earlier, which she knew was very much out of character for her. Eric would recognize that, too, and sooner or later he would get tired of waiting.

It took a few minutes for Stark to get Prometheus into a proper parking orbit around the largest ship in Brisingr, and then he, too, went to see what was going on. That left Jane and Eric alone in the room. The silence hung in the air like a thousand-ton weight on a string above their heads until, finally, Eric shut down the hologram and turned to look at her.

“Jane,” he said. “Something’s on your mind.”

“Yeah, kind of,” she admitted. Should she elaborate? She didn’t know. Although if she said nothing, he would continue to ask questions.

Eric came and sat down beside her. “Jane,” he repeated, “ever since you were my student, you’ve always known you can talk to me about anything. What’s eating at you? You haven’t been yourself all week?”

“I don’t know if I should talk about it,” said Jane, though if she did, she supposed Eric was the best choice. Darcy would only get upset, and Thor would go into stubborn protective mode. “I just... I talked to Tiresias about the entanglement thing, and she agrees with me. She’s linked to the Mind Gem the same way I am to the Aether, and there’s no way to break that bond. The only thing we can really do is scatter it.” She used her hands to indicate something exploding. “The atoms of Malekith’s body were scattered across the nine realms during the convergence. The Earth won’t be safe until we do the same thing with me.”

There. She’d said it.

It was a strange thing to say aloud to somebody – a scientific explanation of why Jane had to die. For a few seconds she just stared at her hands, playing with the hem of her t-shirt, not wanting to see Eric’s reaction to the statement. Once she thought he’d had time to think about it rather than replying on instinct, or perhaps when she could simply bear it no longer, she looked up.

She found him staring at her in concern and confusion. “Don’t be absurd, Jane,” he said. “You can’t be considering suicide.”

“It’s not exactly suicide,” Jane said. “It’s more like... like self-sacrifice. If the world’s not safe with
me, isn't it better off without me? I don't want to die, Eric,” she added, and had to pause so she could swallow a sudden swell of hot, salty tears. Jane had thought she'd been over this enough times in her head that she could think about it logically. *Scientifically.* Apparently, she was wrong. “I just think I might have to. Odin said we have to keep the stones apart. The Mind Gem is on Earth, and as long as I'm alive and in one piece, the Aether will be drawn here, too.”

Eric shook his head. “You can't think like that. There's got to be another answer. There always is. You could go to Asgard,” he suggested.

“No, I already thought of that,” said Jane. “The Tesseract is there. Odin showed it to me. I'd just be putting Asgard in danger instead of Earth, and I don't want to do that, either. If there were a place I could go that didn't have any stones already...” she paused as something awful occurred to her. “I'm not sure I *could* go to a place with no stones!” she said, eyes widening as she realized the implications. “I mean, the universe will arrange itself to keep me in places where there are Infinity Stones, so it might not matter *where* I go! Wherever I end up, there'll be a gem already there!”

“Jane!” Eric grabbed her shoulders. “Stop! That way lies madness, okay?”

She was tempted to say that Eric would know, but that would have been cruel. Instead, she squirmed out of his grip, glaring at him. “I'm not crazy, Eric,” she said. “I don't enjoy thinking about this.”

“There has *got* to be another way,” Eric repeated. “Have you talked to Thor about this?”

“Of course not,” said Jane. “He'd tie me up or something to keep me from trying anything!”

“He's a wise man,” Eric said.

“I specifically asked Tiresias if there were any other way,” Jane insisted. “She said there isn't. You can't break quantum entanglement, Eric, it's a force of nature. It's what *time itself* is made out of. Entanglement causes entropy, and the universe always moves from less entropy to more.”

“Then perhaps if you could go back in time...” he began.

“Stop!” Jane held up a hand. “Listen to yourself! You're really suggesting *time travel* as a serious solution to this problem?”

“Listen to yourself!” Eric countered. “You're suggesting *suicide*!”

“At least we know suicide is *possible,*” Jane pointed out. “Time travel is barely even theoretical! Look, what was Spock's line from *Wrath of Khan*? The needs of the many outweigh the needs of...”

Eric interrupted her. “No,” he said firmly. “I don't care what you say to argue it. If you're trying to make me agree that you ought to kill yourself, you're going to fail. You're my friend, you're an invaluable colleague, I promised your father I'd look after you, and the world is a better place with you than without you.”

“But is any of that worth the risk I pose?” asked Jane.

“Yes. We're finished talking about this,” Eric informed her. “There's another way, Jane. There's always another way. Just because you haven't thought of it yet doesn't mean it doesn't exist.”

“I've been thinking about it all week!” she said. “I haven't come up with anything yet. I've asked representatives of the two most technologically advanced cultures we're in contact with and *they* don't have a way. What does that leave?”
“I don't know, but there's got to be something.” Eric calmly took out his phone. “I'll respect it if you don't want me to say anything to Darcy or Thor, but I'm telling the Avengers' medics about this conversation. As of now, you're on suicide watch.”

“You're over-reacting!” Jane protested.

“Am I?” asked Eric, and put the phone to his ear.

Jane stood there until he greeted whoever had answered his phone call, and then decided she didn't want to hear whatever he was going to tell them. She turned to leave, but Eric caught her arm and gave her a stern look. It was a kindly-meant one, the look of a father trying to keep a misbehaving daughter safe for her own good, but it made her bristle. She was thirty-four years old! She had three PhD's, and he was treating her like a child!

“Yes, hello,” he said to the phone, not taking his eyes off Jane. “This is Dr. Selvig. Dr. Foster has told me some rather troubling things.”

The Avengers agreed not to have a proper discussion of the information Wanda had given them until Tiresias was awake to participate. As Polyphemus' creator, and the one with the Mind Gem token to enhance her natural psychic abilities, she might have information Wanda did not. Nobody could venture a guess what this might be, but all spent the next forty-eight hours silently hoping without being quite sure what they were hoping for.

When Tiresias did finally wake, she was starving and thirsty and had a terrible headache. Pandora had anticipated this, and had food and drink ready for her. Tiresias rolled out of her her cocoon without a word, and immediately began to eat. With nobody around to watch her she had no need of table manners, and she was so hungry she barely bothered to chew, holding the next morsel to her lips before she'd even swallowed the last one.

*If you don't slow down, you're going to choke*, said Pandora.

“You're right,” Tiresias agreed, and forced herself to chew properly. She had to be more careful. If she died of something as silly as a lump of stuck food, everything would be lost.

Pandora allowed her to eat a little more, and then spoke again. *I shouldn't complain*, she said warily, *but it's unusual for you to listen to me so readily. Is something wrong, Mother?*

“No,” said Tiresias. “Nothing is wrong.” In the moment she said it she was absolutely convinced of the fact, but then she reconsidered and corrected herself. “No, everything is wrong,” she decided. “But I can fix that.” She looked up at the window, the shutters still open to show the stars, and for the first time since Pandora woke her, she smiled. “I know now. I know why I had to come along personally. I know what I have to do, and I know how to do it.”

*That's good,* Pandora said, still cautious, *but I don't think I'm pleased. I'm afraid you're going to do something terrible.*

“Oh, I am,” Tiresias said casually, “but don't be afraid. I'm not afraid.” She laughed to herself, and after so long in the solemn, lonely silence of her self-pity, the sound was alien, almost frightening in itself — or it would have been, if Tiresias hadn't felt so perfectly at peace. “Isn't that funny?” she asked Pandora. “For the first time in a thousand years, I have every reason to be afraid, but I'm not!”

She finished her meal and washed it down, then stretched. “Give me something for my headache,” she said, “and then tell the Earthlings I'm awake. I need to talk to them.”

*They are waiting to hear from you,* said Pandora. *Are you sure you don't want to sleep a little*
“I slept for five million years,” she replied. “Now it's time to wake up.”

Pandora announced to the Avengers that Tiresias was up and wanted to talk. Her words were broadcast to the compound, and one by one they set aside whatever they’d been doing and gathered to discuss the situation. So far, most of their conferences had been loud and opinionated, but without any sense of urgency. After all, Brisingr and Polyphemus were both still millions of miles away. Now the atmosphere was exactly the opposite: everyone was quiet and subdued, but on edge, knowing that something had better be done quickly. They knew they'd awakened a giant, and they couldn't sit around and wait for it to strike first.

The console room was full of reporters today, which was a bit of a relief – that setting would have seemed a little too appropriate to the solemn occasion. Instead, while Pandora chatted with the press, the Avengers would work on the real problem through a smaller radio in the kitchen. There was an unspoken agreement that they would keep everything informal. Instead of coffee in logo mugs, today they were drinking soda out of the can. Instead of various suits and ties and superhero costumes, they wore t-shirts and jeans... and yet when he looked around the room, Tony thought this actually made everything worse. It seemed to acknowledge that this was something they had to keep under the table. If this got out... well.. this time the rioting mobs might actually be justified.

It was raining again. Heavy, dreary rain, without thunder or lightning, running down the windows in streams. The damp smell permeated the atmosphere.

“So,” said Steve. “Where do we start?”

The answer seemed obvious to Tony. “We've got to get into that little pocket in space they've made for themselves,” he said. “Get a nuke in there and boom, problem solved.”

“Problems need not always be solved with an explosion,” Thor said.

“No, but it works,” said Tony, looking him right in the eye. “Things that have been reduced to their component atoms don't usually come back and bother you again.”

“The Aether did,” said Dr. Foster. She looked very pale, Tony thought, with her eyes heavily shadowed as if she hadn't slept in days. He wondered if she were ill. She seemed like the kind of person who would work right through it if she were – just like him.

“What do you recommend, then?” he asked her.

Dr. Foster didn't answer, but Wanda did. “Polyphemus is afraid of the Infinity Stones,” she said. “It was made by an Infinity Stone. An Infinity Stone can unmake it.”

“Oh, of course!” said Tony, rolling his eyes. “All we need is an Infinity Stone and a god to wield it for us!” He intended this as sarcasm, but once he'd spoken he paused and then looked at Thor again. Was it possible...

Thor shook his head. “Even Loki needed the Scepter to protect himself from direct contact with the Mind Gem. I do not think I or any other Asgardian would be equal to the task.”

“I can do it,” said Dr. Foster.

Silence fell, broken only by the patter of the rain, and eight heads, plus one Asgardian and one android, turned to stare at her. Tony didn't think he could have heard her right, but he couldn't
imagine what else she'd said that sounded so much like *I can do it.* “Excuse me?” he asked.

“I can do it,” she repeated. “I can wield the Aether.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” said Dr. Selvig.

“The last time you were in contact with the Aether, it nearly killed you,” Thor agreed.

“Almost,” said Dr. Foster. “If my entanglement theory is correct, then it...” she searched for a word, probably looking for one that didn't involve anthropomorphizing the Aether – if so, she failed to find one and settled for, “it knows me now, the same way it knew Malekith. He was the one who put the Aether into its liquid form to make using it easier. Now that he's dead, it might accept me as a substitute.”

“Oh it may kill you,” said the Vision. “You can't know ahead of time.”

“I survived for nearly thirty hours with no permanent damage,” Dr. Foster said. “If I can do it again, that'll be long enough to use it.”

“And then it'll kill you,” said Dr. Selvig. “No.”

“It's worth trying, don't you think?” Dr. Foster looked around the room, searching for support. “Odin knows where the Aether is being kept, or if he doesn't, then somebody on Asgard does, because they were the ones who had to get rid of it.”

“It was placed in Sif's charge,” Thor said. “I have a good idea where she might have taken it. It's a place we visited several times in our youth, I believe in the same way Midgardian children delight in seeing the bones of dinosaurs.” He looked at Foster. “But I will not let you do this. It would destroy you.”

“Me, or the planet?” asked Dr. Foster. “What's more important?”

“Now isn't the time or the place for this, Jane,” said Dr. Selvig. “Besides, we already have a wielder of an Infinity Stone.” He turned to the Vision. “Don't we?”

“Possibly,” the Vision said. “I do draw power from the Gem, and I can use it for certain things, but I think some kind of psychic contact with Polyphemus would be necessary. I'm not capable of that, and...”

“I could act as intermediary,” Wanda suggested.

“Absolutely not,” said the Vision. “The journey alone would be a risk to you. Besides, I was about to say that Polyphemus might use my mind as an intermediary to consume the stone, in which case it would doubtless kill you, too.”

“Excuse me,” said Pandora's voice from the radio. “Tiresias would like a word.”

Tony sat up straight. “Here we go,” he said. “Let's listen to somebody who knows what she's talking about.”

He could have sworn he saw some eyes roll. Were people *annoyed* because Tony had changed his mind about Tiresias? Well, that was their problem. Tony was, as Pepper had observed, willing and able to admit his mistakes, thank you.

“We're listening,” said Steve.
Tiresias' own simulated voice spoke next. “I have a plan,” she said. “I will need your help.”
The room was silent as Tiresias outlined her plan. Rain continued to drum against the windows, a fly buzzed somewhere, and the bubbles in Tony's soda can hissed softly against the metal. If the proverbial pin had indeed dropped, it probably would have made everyone jump.

"Wanda Maximoff and Jane Foster are right," Tiresias said. "Polyphemus can be destroyed by an Infinity Stone, and a person who has had contact with a Stone and survived can wield it again. I can use the Mind Gem, but I won't need all of it. Only a fraction."

"You want another token," Tony guessed. They could do that.

"Not exactly," said Tiresias. "The one you made for me before was adequate for its purpose, but this time I will require something far more powerful, made to more rigorous specifications."

She'd always sounded a little nervous and uncertain when Tony had heard her speak before, as if she wasn't entirely sure what she was doing and was worried how the humans would react to what she had to say. Now her voice was firm and confident and entirely in control. Tony recognized that voice. It went with the feeling he'd had in the pit of his stomach that evening at the party, when the Vanity Fair reporter had shown him photos of the destruction in Gulmira and he'd suddenly been sure, this was what he had to do. It wasn't joy, it wasn't angry, it was just a dead-set, all-consuming certainty. He wouldn't have called it a pleasant emotion, but damn if it wasn't a motivating one.

"The difficulty," Tiresias went on, "is that I'm not sure you can build what I need. You'll pardon me, I hope, but Earth's technology for dealing with Infinity Stones is in its infancy, while Asgard has focused on locking them away rather than using them. Neither of you have the materials or the expertise I need. I've thought about this a great deal over the past couple of days, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask the Vision to come meet me so that I can do this myself. After I draw what I need from the Mind Gem," she added, "he can return to Earth knowing safer ways of dealing with the stones. It will be a trade."

Tony had a question about that, but Wanda cut him off. "What will this 'drawing' do to the Vision?" she asked.

"Tony's equipment caused me only minimal discomfort," the Vision said. "I expect Tiresias' will be considerably more subtle. Her people have been handling the Mind Gem for millennia. I'm sure she knows what she's doing."

"I wasn't asking you," Wanda told him, annoyed.

"I won't harm the Vision," Tiresias promised. There was a short pause, and then she amended the statement. "Not intentionally, at least. I've never had to manipulate the Gem in this way while it was part of a living mind, but if Stark managed to create the first token without causing him any distress, I'm sure I can do the same."

She could probably do better, Tony thought, a little jealous – but then he returned to what he'd wanted to ask. "Can you get there, Vizh?" He frowned at the android. "I mean, you're mostly artificial, but I know you've got living cells in there. I was under the impression that you needed air." They knew very little, really, about how the Vision worked, and it wouldn't have been polite to try to take him apart and find out.
“Atmospheric pressure is comfortable, but not necessary,” said the Vision. “I will need an oxygen supply, but with proper thrust I should be able to get there faster than any of your probes or satellites.” He smiled. “After all, I have no need to avoid other objects in space.”

“That's true,” said Tony, smiling a bit at the mental picture of the Vision phasing right through an asteroid. “I can come up with a helmet, and a harness for a couple of repulsors…” ideas began to swarm into his brain. He looked around, then grabbed a pad of post-it notes from beside the phone to begin jotting things down.

Wanda still wasn't enthusiastic about the proposal. “I don't like it,” she said. “Polyphemus' own link to the Mind Gem is too close. So is Tiresias'. What if something goes wrong?”

“Then I will have Tiresias' own experience and knowledge to help me seek a solution,” said the Vision calmly.

“The Mind Gem is what Polyphemus wants most,” Wanda said. “What if it takes it from you? You would be going up there only to fly into its mouth!”

“It couldn't do that,” Tiresias said.

“I assume, as I said before, that she knows what she's doing,” the Vision repeated. “The fact that I am willing to die in defense of the planet doesn't mean I'll go out of my way to do so.”

“Hear, hear,” muttered Dr. Selvig.

“And if it is dangerous?” Wanda insisted.

“I was created to defend life. If the Avengers hadn't believed I was capable of using the Mind Gem's powers for good, they would have destroyed me,” the Vision said.

“I was made to defend as well,” Wanda reminded him. “I asked for my powers, so that I could defend my family and my people!”

“Hey!” Barton, who had so far been silent, got to his feet. “Look, I'm getting the idea that this isn't actually about what we're supposed to be talking about, here. Maybe this isn't the best place to hash it out.”

“Agreed,” Tony said. “The Vision's a big robot, Wanda. He changes his own batteries and everything. It's up to him whether he wants to participate.” Funny how easy that was to say about Tiresias' project, and how hard to accept that the Vision might not want to be a part of what Tony was doing. He wondered how many times JARVIS would have told him no if he'd been capable.

Wanda was not placated. “But I can't?” she asked, getting to her feet. “I'm more powerful than any of you, and you won't let me do what I do best, because you think you have to protect me!” There was a sudden swirl of red mist around her. The table jumped as if something had struck it, spilling a couple of the soda cans. Various people shrank back or stood up, ready to defend themselves.

“Wanda!” Thor put out a hand. “Calm yourself!”

She blinked, and the mist faded as Wanda realized that losing control of her powers was not a good way to convince people she could save the world. She lowered her head in embarrassment, and waved a hand. The fallen cans stood themselves back up, and spilled soda leaped back into them.

“I think I need to go,” Wanda said, and headed for the door without looking back.
Thor turned to Dr. Foster, who nodded.

“I'll go with her,” she said, finishing the rest of her soda.

Everybody else waited until the two women had left the room, and then the atmosphere relaxed a bit. “Word of advice, Vizh,” said Tony. “Don't go telling women they're not allowed to do something. They'll go ahead and do it anyway out of sheer spite.”

“My own observations suggest that isn't so much a feature of women as it is of humans in general,” the Vision remarked. “You dislike having limits placed upon you. But returning to the matter at hand – Tiresias knows Polyphemus best. If she believes this is the best way to avert the threat with a minimum risk to innocent lives, then I am willing to cooperate. If there is danger to myself...”

“Wanda Maximoff's fears are groundless,” Tiresias said. “I think riding along on my contact with Polyphemus may have given her an exaggerated idea of what it is capable of.”

“Then let's get your Vibranium butt up there,” Tony said to the android. “It's a good feeling, isn't it, Terry?” he asked the voice on the radio. “Finally knowing what you have to do.”

“It is,” Tiresias agreed. “It really, really is.”

Jane followed Wanda out into the hall, where she meant to say something to commiserate in private. She would remind the younger woman of how Jane's offer of help had also been shot down, of how her presentation to the UN had been covered by a reporter who had focused on what Jane was wearing, on how powerful people never took anything seriously besides themselves... but she didn't get the chance, because she immediately noticed that they were not, in fact, in private. Since Eric had made that damned phone call, Jane was never in private anymore. There was always somebody keeping an eye on her.

This time it was a nurse from the medical wing, who approached with a bland smile. “Dr. Foster!” he said. “Just who I wanted to see. I have a question about Dr. Selvig's medication. He's due for a...”

“No, he's not!” Jane snapped. “He just told you to watch me so I won't kill myself!” As if she would do it by jumping off a roof or taking a handful of pills! That would leave her corpse with the same connection to the Aether as her living body, and solve absolutely nothing. “I don't need babysitting!”

The nurse was startled, but collected himself. “May I finish?” he asked. “Dr. Selvig...”

Wanda raised a hand, and a red glow seeped into the nurse's eyes. He blinked twice, then turned and walked away without a word.

Satisfied, Wanda returned her attention to Jane. “Why did you follow me, Dr. Foster?” she asked.

“Because Thor asked me to,” said Jane. “Besides, I didn't want to be in there, either.” Eric had promised not to tell Thor about their conversation, but she was pretty sure he would eventually. When she'd offered to use the Aether she could tell that Eric had been on the verge of just blurtit out to everybody. Jane didn't want to be in the room when it came to that.

“We need to talk,” Wanda decided. “But not here. Follow me.” She took Jane's hand.

Jane hadn't spoken much yet with Wanda Maximoff, at least not without anyone else present – and every time she did, she'd kept remember that idiot who'd told her, on her first day at Avengers HQ, you'll have lots in common, you're both Jewish. The stubborn part of her still wanted to dislike this woman just to spite that guy, but really Jane didn't yet know Wanda well enough to have any
opinion of her at all, beyond finding her powers a little frightening.

As she was led into a stairwell, it did occur to Jane that Wanda was very, very young. At thirty-four, Jane herself was considered young for a scientist, especially one who'd done such significant work, but Wanda couldn't be much more than twenty-two or twenty-five. It was no wonder the Avengers felt protective of her – but Jane could also remember being that age, being patted on the head and described as a girl even though she was clearly a grown woman. Maybe she and Wanda really did have a lot in common, and maybe most of it had nothing to do with religion.

Wanda shut the stairwell door, then raised her arms. Her eyes flashed red, and the doors shuddered in their frames. She was locking everybody else out, Jane thought, and wondered if she ought to be frightened. A smell of electrical smoke marked the moment Wanda deactivated the security camera in the corner.

“What's going on?” asked Jane.

Wanda inhaled deeply. “Fear is powerful,” she said. “It was by far the most powerful emotion in her mind, both times I touched it. She's afraid she'll be unable to correct her mistakes, and she has lived with this fear for many, many years. Now for the first time in centuries, she thinks she sees a way out, and she will do anything for it. I think I know what she's planning. She doesn't need a part of the Mind Gem. She needs the whole thing.”

“She's going to kill the Vision,” said Jane.

“The Vision and possibly herself. She's too much like Stark,” said Wanda. “She doesn't care who else gets hurt, as long as she can destroy Polyphemus. If she fails, and it takes the Gem from her, we will all die immediately. We can't use the Mind Gem to do this. It's too deeply tied to the thing we need to destroy.”

“Then we have to use the Aether,” said Jane. “We don't have anybody who's entangled with the other two, so that's the only option.” It felt so good to have somebody understand that she was right! “We have to make them listen!”

“I'll talk to the Vision,” Wanda said. “I need you to talk to Stark. You're a scientist. He respects you.”

“No, he doesn't,” Jane grumbled – but then, Stark had always called her Dr. Foster, which was more than those idiots at the UN had done. Nor had he ever once remarked on what she was wearing, even when she argued with him in her pajamas. Stark may not like her, but he could separate the personal from the professional. Maybe she could use that. “I'll give it a try, though. What if they still won't listen to us?”

“Then we'll have to do it ourselves,” said Wanda. “Your way, before Tiresias can try to do it hers.”

Pandora had barely closed the conference call with the Avengers when Tiresias began pulling out tools and bringing up blueprints. She hadn't thought she'd ever have to build something like this again, not after hurling the Mind Gem into the void, but she'd brought the instructions along because they, like literature or music or art, were a part of her heritage. The young who'd be born on the new world would need a history, and she'd wanted Pandora to have the tools to give them one.

I'm glad you're excited about something, Mother, Pandora observed, as Tiresias began making calculations, but is this really necessary?

“Yes,” Tiresias said. There was no doubt in her mind at all.
What you are planning to do may kill the vision. His mind may depend on the presence of the Gem.

“I need the Gem,” said Tiresias. “The entire Mind Gem made this monster, the entire Gem will take it apart. The Vision is a machine,” she added reproachfully. “If somebody has to die, I'd rather it be him than a living creature, and so would you.”

What about yourself? Pandora asked.

“This was my mistake.” Tiresias was firm. “I have to fix it. I think the reason I didn't send you off without me and stay behind was because I thought I deserved to live with what I'd done. If I die doing this, I'll die knowing I did something right for once. You won't talk me out of it,” she warned. “I know what I have to do, and Stark is right, it's a good feeling.” In different circumstances, she thought, she and Stark could probably have been a great team. They could have combined what their two civilizations knew and built wonderful things. Or terrible ones.

*The Vision deserves a warning.* This was the third time Pandora had said that. *You are making a choice for yourself. He has far more free will than I do – he deserves to choose, too.*

“No,” Tiresias repeated. “If he has free will then he will have self-preservation. If you warn him, he'll refuse, and we all die. Warn him, and you're dooming the Cargo,” she said. “You know you can't do that. Don't tell him. That's an order.”

*Then if I had hands, they would be tied, as the Earthlings say,* Pandora said. *Don't you even want to consider Jane Foster's idea, that she might use the Reality Gem? With the Mind Gem there is the risk that Polyphemus might absorb its power for itself. There is no such danger with the Reality Gem.*

“Jane Foster should not have to pay for my mistake,” Tiresias said. “From what she has told me, she is paying enough for her own. And that,” she added, “is final.”

The next day, the weather had cleared around Avengers Headquarters, but there remained tension within. Tony was working on fitting the Vision with a breathing mask that would seal properly against the vacuum, and had invited Helen Cho to help. She'd left her two kids with her brother in Korea, and had the Vision walking on a treadmill so that she could study his oxygen intake. They wanted plenty of wiggle room for his journey into space, especially when Tiresias had said he might need to spend several days on board Brisingr.

“It's nice to see Jane again, too,” Helen remarked, running through a list of readouts on a tablet. Dr. Foster was also in the room with Dr. Selvig, sharing more dark matter data with Pandora. The two of them were modeling the orbits of the local group of galaxies around both their own center of mass and the nearby Virgo cluster. Dr. Foster still seemed tired and distracted, but it was kind of nice to see her working again. When Dr. Foster wasn't working, Thor got worried, and when Thor got worried, nobody was happy.

“Thanks, Helen,” Dr. Foster replied, still fiddling with her model. “Pepper told me I only just missed you when I arrived.”

Tony glanced up. “So... you two know each other, too?” He was beginning to suspect an honest-to-goodness conspiracy.

“We met at the Nobel Prize dinner in Stockholm,” said Helen.

“You weren't there,” said Dr. Foster.

“I was probably saving the world,” Tony said.
“Anyway, there probably wouldn't have been time to hang out when I first got here,” Dr. Foster went on. “That was back when we still thought this was just a comet and we were rushing to destroy it before it hit us. Which reminds me of something,” she added, in that significant voice which meant the speaker had just been waiting for an opportunity, any opportunity, to bring something up. She turned her chair to face Tony. “Stark, when we first realized Brisingr was a spacecraft, you're the one who freaked out. You're the one who didn't want to trust Pandora or Tiresias.”

Tony turned around also, to find her glaring right at him. It was as if she were accusing him of a crime. “I admit, I may have over-reacted,” he said. “I think I can be excused. I had a bad experience with aliens, remember? Nuke? Wormhole? I'm sure Thor told you the story.”

Dr. Foster rolled her eyes. “My point is that you did a pretty abrupt about-face there. You thought they were a threat to the world, and now you're going to put all our lives in Tiresias' hands?”

“Tiresias is not a Chi’Tauri,” said Tony. He was actually pretty sure that seeing her had helped his attitude a lot, especially when she was so much smaller, and so much more human-looking, than those reptilian monsters. “She made a mistake, and she deserves a chance to correct it. What about you?” He glared right back at Dr. Foster. “You're the one who thought the Brisings had a lot to teach us. Now they're trying to teach us something and you don't want to learn it.”

“It's not that,” she said. “I'm worried about the Infinity Stone. You know I've got a little more experience with those than you do.”

“Not as much as Tiresias,” said Tony. The Vision had made that point over and over – the Brisings had handled the Mind Gem for millennia without destroying themselves. It was probably safe to assume they knew what to do with it. Dr. Foster had only hosted the Aether for a little more than a day, and she'd been very much a victim of it.

“Jane, if you want to die in a blaze of glory...” Dr. Selvig began.

“I don't want to hear it, Eric,” Dr. Foster cut him off.

“Dying in a blaze of glory sucks,” said Tony bluntly. “And it's unreliable – next thing you know you're flat on your back with a mouthful of dust and a green giant is looming over you and you think he might have woke you with a kiss. Anyway, Thor would crush my skull with his pinky finger if I even entertained the thought of letting you try to use the Aether.”

“There is that,” said Dr. Selvig.

Something on the machinery hooked up to the Vision beeped, and Helen smiled as she checked the results. “You have extremely efficient lungs, Vizh,” she said fondly. “They capture almost all the oxygen you take in.”

“Then I thank you,” the Vision replied. “They were clearly designed by an expert.” He stepped down off the treadmill and grabbed the shirt he'd draped over a chair. Tony wasn't sure why he'd taken it off, since he didn't sweat. “May I be excused? I told Wanda I'd look in on her.”

“Go for it,” said Tony. “We'll call if we need you back.”

The Vision took off his breathing mask and handed it to Helen, then left the room via the wall nearest the living quarters. That left Tony and the three scientists in silence – and not a friendly type of silence, either. Dr. Foster in particular seemed to be waiting for something. Her lips were moving as if she were counting under her breath, and when she reached some significant number, she stood up.
“What if I told you Wanda can read Tiresias' mind,” she said, “and she's planning to kill the Vision and take the Mind Gem so she can destroy Polyphemus, because she's the one who wants to die in a blaze of glory?”

Tony sat up. Trying to die in a blaze of glory was, after all, where his own mistakes had led him, and one of the places where he didn't want Tiresias to go. “Did she say that?”

“Yes,” said Dr. Foster.

Something about it sounded strange, though it took Tony a moment to figure out what that was. “And she hasn't told the Vision about this?” Wanda and the Vision were close. They talked about everything, as recent events had illustrated. If she knew there were a threat to his life, she surely would have said something.

“She's probably telling him right now,” Dr. Foster said. “I figured she'd want to tell him herself. That's why I didn't mention it outright until he left.”

“I guess we'll see what he says, then,” Tony decided. It was, as he'd pointed out earlier, the Vision's life and the Vision's decision.

“What will we do if he changes his mind?” Dr. Foster wanted to know. She was, once again, looking him right in the eye.

“Figure out something else,” Tony replied, meeting her gaze without a flinch. “Maybe something that doesn't involve any Infinity Stones.” He held her eyes long enough to be sure she knew he wouldn't black down on that, and then returned to his work. Hopefully that was enough to signify that the conversation was over.

Apparently it was. The hostile silence resumed.

Helen cleared her throat and put her tablet down where Tony could see the results. “Because he makes such efficient use of oxygen, we won't need nearly as much as for a human astronaut,” she said.

“Yeah, but we'll want extra, just in case,” said Tony. “Anything might happen out there.” He resisted the urge to glance at Dr. Foster as he spoke, which meant he couldn't tell if she looked at him.

Even if the Vision's life were in danger, Tony though, the Vision himself probably already knew. He and Pandora had shared information in the past without telling anybody else... if the two AI agreed that this was the best way to get this done, the Vision might not even care what happened to him. Tony could see that kind of self-sacrifice in the Vision far better than he could see it in Dr. Foster. The Vision at least came by the urge honestly, out of a desire to protect rather than a need to prove himself.

The Vision walked through the wall of Wanda's room, expecting to find her resting in bed. Instead, however, she was up and pacing. Her hair was wet and she had a towel wrapped around her torso, suggesting she had just showered. When he entered the room, she whirled around in surprise.

“Don't do that!” she said.

“Weren't you expecting me?” asked the Vision. He'd entered by the walls before, and she'd never been so upset about it.

“Yes, but you don't just walk into somebody's room! My door was closed!” she pointed at it. “I don't
have any clothes on!"

“You are covered,” he said. “And even if you weren’t, I am familiar with the human…”

“That’s not the point!” she said. “Next time at least knock. Wait outside while I get dressed.”

The Vision backed through the wall again, making a note for future interactions.

A few minutes later, the door opened – Wanda was now fully dressed in a red sweatshirt with two sequined stars on the front, and a pair of jeans. Her hair was still wet but she'd braided it so it wouldn't hang in her face.

“All right,” she said. “Now you can come in.”

He did so. “I'm pleased to see you looking after yourself,” he offered, sitting down on the bed.

This was intended to reassure, but the Vision could tell at once that it had been the wrong thing to say. Wanda's eyes narrowed.

“I'm just fine,” she informed him, arms folded across her chest. “It wasn't nearly as bad as the first time, and anyway, I'm not as delicate as you think.”

She was obviously furious, and yet this wasn't normal for her – when Wanda was upset, she shouted, as she had when the Vision walked into her room unannounced. If she were particularly angry, objects around her might levitate or catch fire. Now, however, she was cold and calm, deliberately keeping a handle on herself. It was somehow far more worrying than violent rage could ever be.

“I apologize,” the Vision said. “Perhaps my fears were misplaced.”

“I've told you before, you don't need to protect me,” Wanda repeated. “Right now, I'm trying to protect you.”

He frowned. “If you don't need protection, then surely I don't,” he said. “If it will ease your mind, I did speak to Pandora about your fears, privately.” It had been a brief but in-depth discussion, held silently over the radio connection in between spoken words of the earlier planning sessions. “She believes you may have been overwhelmed by your contact with Polyphemus. You aren't accustomed to minds on that scale.”

“It was overwhelming, yes,” Wanda said, “but I know what I saw. Her intentions are good, but she will take the Mind Gem and destroy you, and if Polyphemus can absorb it through her, it will kill us all.”

Her worry suddenly made sense then, as the Vision realized where it must be coming from. He stood and reached to take her hands. “Wanda,” he said. “That is not Tiresias' plan. That is her worst fear.”

“No, her worst fear is failure,” Wanda pulled away from him. “That's why she's willing to do anything to make sure she succeeds! She's too much like Stark. Polyphemus has a link to the Mind Gem already. It will be too easy for it to absorb its power. It's too dangerous, and there is another way.”

The Vision decided to entertain the idea. “What other way?”

“Jane's way, with the Aether.”

“We can't do that.” The Vision shook his head. “Tiresias and her people know the Mind Gem in a
way nobody else knows *any* of the Infinity Stones, including me. Her solution is the one with the fewest unknown elements.”

“And the worst consequences if it fails!” Wanda insisted. “What's wrong with you? You've always listened to me and trusted me, even when nobody else did. You listened to me when I told you that Tiresias existed, and when I said she meant no harm. Now when I say she *does* mean harm, to *you*, you don't want to hear it?”

“I've assessed the risk,” said the Vision. “Pandora says…”

“Pandora!” she snarled. “Why do you trust her better than me? Is it because you were both made with the Mind Gem? So was I!”

“Not in quite the same way,” the Vision said.

“You and Pandora weren't made the same way, either,” said Wanda.

It struck the Vision that Wanda herself was very like Tony in some ways. Fragments of memories from JARVIS told him that Tony Stark dealt with grief through recklessness. When he'd believed he was dying of palladium poisoning, he'd responded by taking risks, hoping to end his life quickly and heroically. Now the Vision's earlier fears about Wanda's risky behaviour resurfaced. “You've nearly killed yourself twice now in confronting the Brisings,” he said. “Wanda. Do you believe that when you die, you will find your brother?”

She stared at him for a moment, then her lips pressed into a line and she shoved him hard. When it had no effect, she pushed again, this time summoning up her telekinetic powers to send him staggering backwards in a burst of red light. *This* was more like how Wanda Maximoff got angry, and it was almost a relief. “Is that what you think I'm doing?” she demanded, tears in her eyes. “You think I'm trying to commit suicide! That's... *dilo!* I don't know if I'll see Pietro when I die, but I do know that if he's watching me now, he wants me to live!”

The Vision held out a hand as if to calm an animal. “If he would want you to live, then live. Don't put yourself in danger when we can do this without your sacrifice.”

“That is *not*...” she began, then threw her hands in the air. “*Guav cho muy!*” she shouted, and pushed past him to storm out.

The Vision did not follow her.

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Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig had left by the time the Vision came back to the room where Tony and Helen were still working. Tony studied his face and body language, trying to see if he could make a guess how the conversation with Wanda had gone, but the Vision was, as always, unreadable.

“Would either of you like any assistance?” the android asked. It was a suspiciously banal question.

“Yes, thank you,” said Helen, but then she cocked her head. “What's wrong?”

How she was able to tell, Tony had no idea, but the Vision gave a mechanical approximation of a sigh. “I spoke with Wanda,” he said.

“She wasn't happy to see you,” Tony guessed.

“She has recovered from her encounter with Polyphemus,” the Vision said, “but she is worried for me. She doesn't want to accept that our options are severely limited.”
“Are you sure of that?” Tony asked. Dr. Foster's concerns had unsettled him.

“I am,” said the Vision. “Why do you ask? Do you have misgivings?”

“Just something Dr. Foster said,” Tony admitted, but a moment later he realized what he was really worried about. The Vision was all he had left of JARVIS. He just didn't want to lose this last piece of his old friend. It was as stupid and selfish as most of his interactions with the Vision had been, and deserved no more consideration. “She said something about Wanda reading Tiresias' mind.”

“She has seen what Tiresias fears, and believes it must inevitably come to pass,” the Vision agreed. “I tried to reassure her, but she became angry.”

_What Tiresias fears._ The equivalent of Tony's vision of a world destroyed by the Chi'Tauri. It was a relief to know it was only a nightmare, but at the same time a little terrifying to think that even Wanda couldn't tell the difference sometimes between reality and the terrors she could dredge up out of the backs of people's minds. That sounded like a hell of a way to live, always seeing everybody's worst case scenario.

“You're the one who has the little robot club with Pandora up there,” said Tony. “If you think this plan is best, then we'll go with it. Last time we put the world in your hands it worked out okay.”

“Thank you for your trust,” said the Vision.

“I know you worried about earning it,” Tony joked, “hard to be sure with no hammers available.” The truth was, of course, that he couldn't help but trust the Vision. He'd trusted JARVIS with his life. He'd trust the Vision with everybody's.
The Needs of the Many

The next day found Jane in the building's small, mostly-digital library as she worked on some calculations – and annoyingly enough, Eric was still there watching over her. He wasn't obtrusive about it. He didn't insist on talking to her, or hover over her shoulder. He was just there, and it made her want to grind her teeth. His intentions were honourable enough, but this seemed to be the year of Honourable Intentions Making Everything Worse. They were certainly doing a number on Jane's mood.

So despite being pretty sure Wanda was bringing bad news, she was relieved to see the younger woman enter the room. Wanda sat down at the table across from Jane, then turned to look over her shoulder at Eric. Jane's stomach twisted... was Wanda planning on doing what she'd done with the nurse the other day? Jane couldn't allow that. Eric had never fully recovered from his experience with Loki's scepter and to mess with his brain again might be more than he could take. She reached out and grabbed Wanda's wrist.

“Wanda!” she said, and then dropped her voice, keeping it low enough to suggest secrecy but still within Eric's hearing. “Did you find the Midol?” she asked pleadingly.

Wanda blinked in puzzlement, then realized what Jane was doing. “Yes, I did,” she said, playing along. “I've got it in my bag.” She put her purse on the table and pretended to hunt for something.

“Oh, good,” said Jane in exaggerated relief. “I swear, it's gotta be the stress. It's like the elevator scene from The Shining.”

Eric drained his coffee and stood up. “I'm gonna go get another cup,” he mumbled on the way by.

Jane and Wanda watched him go, and Wanda sealed the doors.

“American men are such children,” she observed.

“Even if they are, he's got no excuse. He's from Sweden,” said Jane. “So it didn't go well, huh.” There was no need for a question mark at the end of that sentence. If Stark and the Vision had changed their minds, Jane would have heard about it already.

“No, it didn't,” said Wanda, disgusted. She pushed her purse aside and leaned on the table, sullen. “The Vision thinks we have to do it the way with the 'fewest unknowns'.”

“That sounds like how an artificial intelligence would think,” Jane said. “Stark is just being stubborn. He's been wrong once already and he doesn't want to be wrong again. He said he would go with whatever the Vision decided, so if the Vision's determined to do it...”

“Even if he believed me, he would still go,” Wanda groused. “He thinks it's heroic self-sacrifice. Apparently he's allowed to do that, but when I want to, it's foolish of me.”

“Sounds about right,” said Jane sourly. “Same with changing our minds. Men 're-evaluate the situation', but women are 'flighty'. She shook her head. “So we have to do this ourselves.”

“Yes, and we have to do it before the Vision reaches Brisingr,” Wanda agreed. “If Tiresias gets the Mind Gem, we're doomed.”

Jane flipped back through her pages of notes. “Brisingr is still about five billion kilometres away,” she said. “Do we know how long it's gonna take him?”
“He said they're planning on launching the day after tomorrow, and then it should take five days.”

“That's all?” Jane was astonished. Stark's repulsors could ramp things up to speeds that would make NASA drool, but that was still incredibly fast.

“He doesn't have to go around objects,” said Wanda. “So we have about a week.”

A week to save the galaxy. “That's not much time,” said Jane.

“Where is the Aether?” Wanda asked.

That was their biggest problem. “I have no idea,” Jane admitted. “Thor's not going to tell me. He said his dad told Sif to get rid of it, but I don't know where she is. Pepper said she'd ask Melinda to look for her, but Melinda May does a lot of special ops and she's almost impossible to get in touch with.” She stared at her notebook, letting the numbers and equations blur in front of her eyes as she thought about it. “Thor has a few friends who might be able to figure it out based on what he did tell me: it's a place they used to hang out as kids to see the Asgardian equivalent of dinosaur bones. But last I heard they were on peace-keeping gigs all over the Nine Realms.” That left only one option, and it wasn't one Jane was fully comfortable with. “Odin might tell me. He showed me the Tesseract. Maybe he'll show me the Aether.”

“Can we contact him?” Wanda asked.

That was their second-biggest problem. “Maybe. The only way I know of is by Quantum Pot, but mine is built into the console. We can probably use it there, but not while anyone else is communicating with Brisingr, and Pandora will probably hear the entire conversation and she might warn them.”

“We'll need to try it in the middle of the night, then,” Wanda decided. “The Vision said Pandora is trying to synchronize Tiresias' sleep schedule with ours, so that she'll be available to talk when we are. Night time is when we're least likely to be interrupted by anybody.”

“I don't know,” said Jane. “The Vision doesn't sleep, and the way Stark's up all night, I'm not entirely sure he isn't a vampire.”

“I can handle Stark,” Wanda promised.

Technically it was the next morning, two thirty AM to be precise, when the two women crept down to the console room. Jane was fully dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with three wolves howling at the moon – she wasn't about to get all dolled up in Phillip Lim and Miu Miu again, but nor was she going to talk to the Allfather in her pajamas. They'd hoped there would be nobody awake, but light was showing around the edges of the doors. When these slid open, they found Stark still awake and tinkering with the oxygen tanks.

He raised his head. “Can I help you ladies?” he asked, with a puzzled frown.

“Yeah. We're an intervention,” said Jane.

“Before she left, Miss Potts asked us to make sure you slept properly,” Wanda said. “Here we are, and you're not sleeping.”

“Neither are you,” Stark pointed out.

“We got up to check on you,” said Jane. She came closer, which gave Wanda an excuse to do the
same without making Stark any more suspicious than he already was. "Pepper said to tell you that you can't save the world when you're half asleep."

"I can't save the world while I'm all asleep, either," said Stark.

Wanda shook her head. "Goodnight, Stark," she said, and passed a hand in front of his face. A red glow washed over him, then his eyes rolled up, and Jane caught his limp body as he slumped forward.

"He'll be okay, right?" Jane asked, doing her best to be gentle as she let him down onto the floor. Stark was in good shape from all that hauling machinery around, and for only being five foot nine, he was surprisingly heavy. She grabbed Helen's lab coat, which had been left draped over a nearby stool, and folded it up to put under his head for a pillow.

"He'll probably be more okay than he's been in weeks," said Wanda. She approached the console and studied it. "Can we get the Pot out? Then maybe Pandora couldn't overhear us."

"I don't think it works that way." Jane put her hands on her hips and frowned as she thought about it. "The Pot is permanently entangled with whatever Stark built into Prometheus and Oracle. Besides, I'm not entirely sure I could get it back in. I've had bad experiences taking stuff apart and not being able to put it back together." She pulled up a chair and sat down. "We'll just have to try it this way."

Wanda leaned in to watch and listen as Jane pressed the button to open voice transmission. "Odin!" she called out. "Odin, this is Jane Foster. I need to talk to you." Did night and day on Asgard follow night and day in upstate New York? Jane had assumed they did without ever actually thinking about it. It had been day on Earth and in Asgard for her first visit, but then she'd been on London time, and for her two visits since she'd been mostly indoors and hadn't stayed long enough to really observe the passage of time.

"I'm sorry, there's no Odin here," said Pandora's voice. "I think you have the wrong number."

Jane blinked. "Was that a joke?" she asked.

"Was it?" Pandora sounded equally surprised. "The idiom dictionary in the Vision's language software upload suggested it would be an appropriate reply."

"Forget it," said Jane. "We were never here." She let the button up and looked up at Wanda. "You were in here before when he had it apart. Where's the Pot?"

"Behind there somewhere." Wanda pointed to a panel.

Jane stepped over Stark's unconscious body and grabbed his tool box so that she could open the machine. With the screws removed and the panel off, she found the Quantum Pot upside-down and full of wires and computer parts. There was no mist seeping out of it, which was worrying... what if Stark had done something to it, on purpose or by accident, so it couldn't be used the normal way anymore? She used her phone to take pictures of the arrangement so she could replace it later, then eased the Cauldron off the mass of technology and turned it over.

As soon as the Pot was right-side up again, the mist bubbled up. Jane sighed, relieved, and held out a hand over the top. "Odin! It's Jane Foster, Thor's friend from Midgard! Please answer me! We need to talk to you, it's important!"

More mist welled up and spilled over the edge, changing colour from white to pewter-gray to almost black, and Jane hardly dared breathe. She would not have described herself as religious. The universe was far too vast and complicated for the sort of personal, anthropomorphic god postulated
by the Abrahamic religions, or even for the pantheons of pagan ones, but if Jane had been inclined to pray, now would have been a good time. It occurred to her that she might well be praying already. What other word could be used for trying to invoke Odin?

The mist rose into a tower, and Jane snatched her hand back as it formed a humanoid figure. For a moment it looked too tall and thin to be Odin, and between that and the dark colour Jane found herself irrationally terrified that she'd somehow managed to call up Loki from whatever the Asgardian afterlife might be. Then, however, the mist suddenly went white again, and settled into the form of the Allfather. He was dressed in a long robe, and squinting as if he'd been woken from sleep.

“You've never contacted me alone,” he said. “Is Thor in trouble?”

“Not yet,” said Jane. He would be. They all would be. “I'm sorry I woke you up, but we're all going to be in trouble, and Thor won't help me.”

“Explain,” Odin ordered.

Jane glanced at the console. The wires and parts she'd pulled the Pot out of probably worked to translate the electrical signals produced by the earthly technology into something the Pot could transmit, which would then be decoded again by Oracle. Pandora might know this conversation was happening, but she might not be able to understand it. Might not. Was it worth the risk?

“I can't,” she said. “Not here. Somebody might be listening over this connection. Can you send the Bifrost for us? I'm sorry,” she repeated, “but I swear I wouldn't as if it wasn't important.”

“I will,” Odin decided. “But if this is not worth rousing me for, there will be consequences, Jane Foster!”

“Yes, sir,” she said. If Tony Stark were prepared to deal with the consequences of his actions, then so was Jane.

Tony woke the next morning feeling refreshed, which was a weird experience – especially when he realized he'd been sleeping face-down on the floor, drooling a little into Helen's folded lab coat. Normally he woke up slow and groggy, and needed a couple cups of coffee or even a dose of melatonin before he was really ready to go. But now, other than an unpleasantly stiff trapezius muscle, he felt fine.

The Vision was crouched over him, one hand on Tony's back. “Are you all right?” the android asked.

Tony propped himself up on his elbows and brushed gunk out of the inner corners of his eyes. “I think so,” he said. “Yeah... actually, I feel great. What happened? The last thing I remember...” theAndroid blinked a couple of times. “Shit.”

“What?” asked the vision.

“Wanda and Dr. Foster were in here.” Tony picked himself up and tried to stretch the crick out of his neck. “They told me Pepper had asked them to make me go to bed, and then Wanda did her Jedi Mind Trick thing and knocked me out.” He took inventory of the room. Everything looked normal... except that his toolbox was on the floor, wrenches and screwdrivers scattered next to the console. That was bad.

“Wanda and Dr. Foster are missing,” the Vision said grimly. “Dr. Selvig tried to find Dr. Foster this morning and could not. He is afraid she's done some harm to herself.”
“She talked to me about needing to die so Earth wouldn't be linked to the Aether anymore,” said Dr. Selvig, who was standing next to Thor in the doorway. “I promised her I wouldn't tell anybody. I should have said something, promises be damned.”

“I fear the same for Wanda,” the Vision confessed.

“Hit the button,” Tony ordered. He sat down next to the toolbox and grabbed a screwdriver so he could open the console panels. He knew, with a distressing stone-cold certainty, that the two women must have sabotaged the machine. That was why they'd needed to knock him out. “See if you can contact Pandora.”

The Vision obeyed. “Greetings, Pandora,” he said. “Did Dr. Foster or Wanda Maximoff speak to you last night?”

“Greetings Vision,” Pandora replied immediately, which startled Tony – he'd been sure they would discover the machine no longer worked. “Jane Foster talked to me briefly, at about a quarter to three AM. She asked to speak to somebody called Odin, then told me to forget it and said she was never here. After that signals were interrupted for twenty-four minutes and nine seconds.”

“She spoke to Father? Alone?” asked Thor, but rather than wait for an answer he turned and strode out of the room, purpose in his step. Tony glanced at Dr. Selvig and the Vision in turn, and then got up so all three could follow him out together.

On the lawn out front, they found a fresh Bifrost scar overlaid on the one from Thor and Dr. Foster's last trip. The grass had been starting to grow back on the old one. The new one was dry, charred soil.

“I'm just going to put a patio in here,” Tony grumbled. “Or a pond. See how they like that.”

The Vision knelt down to touch the earth. “Cold,” he said. “They've been gone for hours.”

Thor stood in the middle of the circle, and raised a hand. Mjolnir flew into it, and his t-shirt and jeans transformed into his Asgardian armor. “Heimdall!” he roared. “The Bifrost!”

It touched down in a roar of colour and sound, and Thor was gone.

He returned four hours later, alone. Tony and Helen were busy in the console room, fitting the Vision with his thrusters and oxygen tanks, when the towering Asgardian walked in and let Mjolnir fall with a thump to the floor. The expression on his face told them everything they needed to know.

“You couldn't find them?” asked Dr. Selvig.

Thor sat down heavily in a swivel chair, which sagged under his weight. “I found no trace of them,” he said. “Heimdall told me that Father had him send the Bifrost for them. They arrived, Jane introduced Wanda, and then they went to the city. From there...” he shook his head. “It's as if they vanished utterly. Father said he waited for them, but they never arrived. He feared they had come because I was in some sort of trouble. He has guards combing the city for them now, and my own friends are searching the surrounding islands.”

Two young women, alone, in the middle of the night, in a city full of men twenty times stronger than any human, Tony thought. He hoped Asgardians were more civilized than humans.

“Could they have stumbled on one of those portals you said Loki used?” asked Dr. Selvig. “Or tried to take a ship they didn't know how to fly?”
“If a portal existed within the city, it would be known to others than Loki.” Thor got up and began to pace, heavy-footed and restless like a circus lion. “Only a madman could have discovered the one we took to Svartalfheim. And if I could figure out how to pilot Malekith's ship, Jane is more than clever enough to steer one of our barks. If she couldn't, Wanda could fly it with her mind alone. I've seen her move heavier things.” He turned on his heel, hands behind his back, frowning in through. “We never tried the cell where Father hid the Tesseract. The door will open for none but him, but we looked regardless. There was no-one.”

Tony wanted to offer some words of comfort, but he really didn't know either the women or Asgard well enough to do so. The best he could manage was, “they'll show up when they're hungry.”

Thor glared at him.

“Just trying to lighten the mood,” Tony muttered.

“What about Heimdall?” asked Dr. Selvig. “Can't he see everything in the Nine Realms?”

“Everything he chooses to look upon,” said Thor, “but even he cannot find them. The last time he could not see Jane was when the Aether had entered her.” He raked his hands through his long blond hair. “I fear... I fear they may have fallen from the bridge.” Just saying this made Thor's face crumple, as if the words alone broke his heart.

Dr. Selvig got up and put a hand on Thor's shoulder. “They're smarter than that,” he said. “We'll find them.”

“What now?” asked Helen. She tightened a strap on the Vision's tanks, then looked up at him. “Are you still going to Brisingr, even with them missing?”

“I must,” the Vision said. “Wanda's life is important to me. So is Dr. Foster's. But they are not as important as helping Tiresias destroy Polyphemus.”

“The needs of the many,” said Dr. Selvig.

“We've got a little time,” Tony reminded them. “Brisingr won't reach Venus for another eight weeks, and Polyphemus is a long way behind it.”

“Then we should use that time as efficiently as possible,” the Vision replied. “If this plan fails, we will need time to conceive and enact another. Thor and his friends know Asgard and its environs far better than I do. I would be very little help to them, and I am the only one who can take the Mind Gem to Tiresias.”

Tony found that depressingly logical. If JARVIS had been here, that was the advice he would have given – and if it had been Pepper who'd vanished between here and Asgard, Tony would have ignored him entirely and dropped everything to find her. It was nice to know there were cooler heads around here than his... but the lack of sentiment made him a little sad. Was it wrong to ignore one's emotional priorities like that? Or would it be wrong to listen to them?

They left Dr. Selvig to try to comfort Thor with kind words and Swedish Egg coffee, and resumed preparing for the Vision's flight into space. There hadn't been time to tell Dr. Foster and Wanda, but Tony had found them an earlier launch window. It was very brief, requiring split-second timing to hit it, but it would get the Vision to Brisingr a full day earlier than they'd hoped.

That evening at sunset, while Helen got the Vision into his thruster harness and oxygen helmet, Tony suited up in what he called the Tugboat – a heavy-duty suit he'd built to assist in satellite launches. He'd used it a month or so earlier to take Prometheus as far as low Earth orbit. Now he would do the
same for the Vision. The Tugboat was not unlike the Hulkbuster in overall outline, but more streamline for smoother flight, with air seals and radiation shielding, and a built-in G-suit. The external surface was covered in black and white insulating tiles to protect the pilot from the heat of re-entry, making it look something like a humanoid space shuttle. It wasn’t Tony’s most graceful suit, and definitely not the most comfortable to wear, but it didn’t need to be.

The various components clicked into place around Tony's body while FRIDAY ran diagnostics. The faceplate came down last and the HUD popped up, displaying the green outline of a thumbs-up.

All systems go, FRIDAY announced.

“Thanks,” said Tony. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The Tugboat was too big to fit through the doors, so instead panels slid back in the ceiling, and an elevator lifted Tony to the roof. The Vision and Helen joined him there, having come up the stairs. It was an overcast day outside, with a chilly wind blowing. Summer was almost over.

“I’m so proud of you,” Helen was saying, smiling as she adjusted the Vision's straps all over again. “At the Nobel Prize dinner, a reporter asked me if I were sad that my family could not be there with me. I told him that it’s more important to me that my son and daughter in Korea work hard on their schooling – and that my son in America continue to help the Avengers.”

The Vision considered that. “If I'm your son,” he said, “does that make Ultron my father.”

“I guess it does,” Helen said. “In which case we’ll just say I’m glad you take after my side of the family. Although you have a lot of your grandfather in you, as well.” She looked over the Vision’s shoulder at Tony, who was just stepping off the elevator, and winked.

“I think we might be stretching the metaphor a bit,” said Tony. “Unless we’re making Thor the midwife who delivered him. I'll deal with being grandpa if Thor has to be the midwife.”

Thor and Dr. Selvig had come up to watch, too. They were sitting on the half-wall around the edge of the roof. “That seems a fitting description of my role,” Thor said. “And midwife is an honourable occupation.” The joke appeared to have passed him by completely.

“Okay, then,” said Tony, with a shrug that did not translate to movement of the suit. Not that the Tugboat was one that particularly needed to express body language... but he made a note to look at the shoulder apparatus when he got back.

Helen checked the seal on the helmet one last time, then nodded, satisfied. “Be safe,” she told the Vision.

“I will be as safe as I can,” he promised, “while keeping all of you safe, as well.”

“All right, Vizh.” Tony stumped over to the helipad and knelt down on it. Fortunately, the Vision would be able to hang on and let go for himself, and they wouldn’t need a complicated system of pressure-operated clamps like they had for the capsule containing Prometheus. “Piggyback time with Granddaddy!”

The Vision climbed up, settling into the payload compartment and pulling the cover shut over him to preserve the Tugboat's streamlined shape. “I'm ready,” he said.

Helen, Thor, and Dr. Selvig went back downstairs to join a few other people, including Rhodey and Miss Lewis, who were going to be watching from the lawn below.
“Everybody clear?” Tony asked.

FRIDAY did a scan. *Nobody in the danger zone*, she said.

“Then Houston, we are go for launch,” said Tony, and fired up the repulsors. The Tugboat rose into the air with a roar, slowly at first, then faster and faster as the world dropped out from under them. Tony kept his eyes on Avengers HQ and the little group of people waving goodbye from next to the Bifrost scar, until they passed through the clouds and the ground was no longer visible.

*Altitude ten thousand feet and climbing*, said FRIDAY cheerfully.

“Keep us posted,” Tony told her. “Everything okay back there, Vizh?”

“All readings are within parameters so far,” the android replied. There was a brief pause. “Tony,” he said. “May I make a request?”

“Sure,” said Tony.

Twenty thousand feet, said FRIDAY. The clouds were thickening. For a few seconds visibility was zero, with nothing but white fog all around them, and then they emerged into clear air. The cloud layer spread out below them like a vast expanse of cotton balls, tinted pink by the sunset.

“If I am unable to return, but Wanda is, please tell her... please tell her that she is very special tome,” the Vision said. “The first contact I ever had with another living thing was her mind reaching out to mine. I believe it made a great impression on me.”

Tony wasn’t sure what to think of that. It sounded like the vision was trying to say *tell her I love her*, but without using those words. “I’ll mention it,” he said, “but let’s hope I won’t have to.”

Fifty thousand feet, said Friday.

“Also, if I am unable to return...” the Vision hesitated again. “I would like to be commemorated as you would a colleague. I would like a funeral.”

“You’ll get one,” Tony promised. Maybe he should have done that for JARVIS, he thought... maybe he should have given his AI a funeral. That might have helped Tony to let him go and move on, instead of continuing to look for pieces of him in the Vision.

Eighty thousand feet.

The Tugboat gained speed as the air resistance decreased. The many colours of the sunset faded to indigo, then to black. Stars came out.

“How’s our time?” asked Tony.

*Looking good*, said FRIDAY. *We’re going to make the window just fine.*

“Something’s going right?” Tony said. “Imagine that!”

They settled into orbit at a hundred and eighty miles up, and FRIDAY counted down the last few seconds to their window.

*Three... two... one... separate*, she said.

A clunking sound reverberated through the Tugboat as the Vision opened the cover on the cargo compartment. Tony waited a few seconds for him to get clear, then fired his own thrusters to turn
around and see the android floating free, a few yards away. Tony waved, and the Vision waved back. One by one, the Vision tested his retrofit systems: repulsors, oxygen valves, navigation, and radio. Tony might have been Granddaddy, but that caution that made the Vision check and re-check to be absolutely positive everything was safe... that came from JARVIS. Tony was sure of it.

*Everything is in working order,* the Vision said over the radio link. His mouth, visible through the clear bubble of the oxygen helmet, did not move – a robot didn't need to speak aloud to transmit. *I will stay in contact for as long as possible, but once I'm a light-hour from Earth, it will no longer be practical. You'll have to wait until I get within range of Oracle to resume communication.*

“Got it,” said Tony. “Bon voyage, buddy.”

The Vision fired up his new repulsors, and Tony floated there, watching the red and green humanoid shape launch itself into the unknown. The Vision slowly shrank to a bright point, and then vanished entirely among the stars.

*You've only got four hours of oxygen,* FRIDAY reminded Tony. *Time to head back.*

Tony nodded, doing his best to tamp down the pit in his stomach. The fate of the Vision – and of humanity in general – was out of his hands now. All he could do was the two things he hated most, watch and wait. “Think we could stop and ring the doorbell on the ISS before we go home?” he asked.

*I don't think space stations have doorbells,* said FRIDAY.

The radio connection crackled. *Perhaps you could limit yourself to knocking on the window and waving,* the Vision's voice suggested.

“Just for you, Vizh,” Tony told him.

The next few days passed in one long, agonizing wait.

Thor and Dr. Selvig waited anxiously to hear about Wanda and Dr. Foster, but there was no news. Other Asgardians, almost as obnoxiously tall and good-looking as Thor himself, dropped by to give reports, but there wasn't much to report. Everybody was looking, and nobody was finding. One of the Warriors Three seemed to take a shine to Helen and made several attempts to flirt with her, but she was entirely oblivious. She, like Tony, was waiting to hear from the Vision, and became more and more restless until by the end of the second day, she had stopped even pretending to work. Instead, she got out her needlework and sat in one of the common rooms, working on a *chasu* pillow slip with such ferocity that she soon had band-aids on three different fingers.

The lawn got browner and deader as the Bifrost came and went over and over.

“Why are you here?” Tony asked Thor, early in the morning on day four.

“I beg your pardon?” Thor asked, looking up from his breakfast. Six slices of French toast – a small serving for him. He'd cut each one carefully into quarters, but hadn't yet eaten a bite.

“You don't want to be here,” Tony told him. “You want to be in Asgard looking for the women. Why don't you go?”

“I said I would remain here in case they returned,” said Thor. “So here I am.”

“We're here in case they come back,” Tony said.
Thor shook his head. “If Jane returns... I want to be here.”

Tony gave up. “All right,” he said. He wondered if Thor were planning to kiss her or shout at her... or make a stalwart but failed attempt to do both at the same time.

Suddenly, there was a voice on the little radio on the kitchen counter – the one they'd hooked into the console so they could speak to Tiresias in a less-formal setting. Avengers, this is the Vision. Do you read me?

Tony wasn't sure how he got across the kitchen – he didn't remember going around the table, so he must have either crawled under it or climbed over it. Either way, he heard the voice, and the next thing he knew he was there with the radio in his hand. “Vizh, this is Iron Man!” he said. “We have audio!”

A few seconds passed – the Vision was far enough from Oracle for a time lag. Then he replied. It's good to hear from you, Tony. It's been a lonely few days. Is there any word of Wanda or Dr. Foster?

“I'm afraid not,” said Tony, “but Thor hasn't given up yet. You know, son of Odin, as long as there's breath in his body, that sort of thing.” It was serious subject matter, and yet Tony could not stop himself from grinning with relief. “How about your end? Any news? Good or otherwise?”

I am approaching Brisingr, the Vision replied. Pandora has already welcomed me. I am looking forward to meeting her and Tiresias in person.
Knocking on Heaven's Door

Tiresias had spent the week waiting, too. Pandora kept her in contact with the Vision through Oracle for as long as it was practical, but then she, too, had to wait until he was within realistic radio range. This gave Tiresias time to work, which she appreciated, but it was also deeply unnerving. If something happened to him, she wouldn't know. If he changed his mind, or began to suspect that something was not what it seemed, she wouldn't know, not until it was too late. Tiresias had to count on her own persuasiveness, and that didn't inspire confidence.

Continued conversations with Earth told her that even if the Vision were not suspicious, there were others who were. Stark began niggling at her shortly after informing her that the android and his precious cargo were on their way.

“What if this doesn't work?” he asked.

“It will work,” Tiresias promised him. She was sending him more information about the gravity technology her people had developed in their heyday. He'd seemed very interested in it earlier, although he hadn't mentioned it for a week or so, and Tiresias knew that the astronomers had been excited about its potential as a scientific tool. That was delightful – with a proper power source, the gravity generator could be the most destructive weapon in any galaxy, and yet the Earthlings wanted to use it to make maps.

Today, however, it didn't seem to be enough of a distraction. “Humour me,” Stark insisted. “Hypothetically, if it doesn't work, do you have a back-up plan?”

That was a difficult question, because Tiresias didn't have an answer for it that would be both honest and reassuring. “No,” she admitted. “Do you?”

“Not really,” said Stark. “We've got Dr. Foster's idea about the Aether, but that's it, and...” he stopped in mid-sentence, as if he'd just thought of something.

“And what?” Tiresias asked.

“I'm about to ask a really weird question,” Stark said. “You wouldn't happen to have heard from Dr. Foster or Wanda, would you? In the last day or so, say?”

That was a curious question. “Pandora said she spoke to them very briefly, late at night,” Tiresias said, “but apparently it was a mistake. They were trying to contact somebody else. Why do you ask?” He hadn't asked whether any of the other Avengers had been talking to her. Tiresias had been under the impression that all were free to do so if they liked.

“But they're missing,” Stark said.

“Missing?”

“Yeah, as in not here and we can't find them,” he said, sounding irritated by the question. “We thought they might have said something to you, because the last time we talked to them, you were what they were worried about.”

Tiresias still didn't quite understand. “How can they be missing when Wanda Maximoff is a telepath?” Nobody had ever gone 'missing' on her own world... if they had, they were found within minutes.
“She's not bothering to think at us where she is!” Stark said, even more annoyed. “And we can't call her up because the most wonderful, wonderful thing about Wandas is she's the only one. If they were to suddenly turn up on your spaceship or something, you'd let us know, wouldn't you?”

“Of course I would,” said Tiresias, still more puzzled yet. “But I had understood that creatures from your planet can't survive in my environment, any more than I could in yours.”

“We can't,” grumbled Stark, “but the last few weeks have been full of surprises. Wanda was worried about the Vision,” he added. “She and him are pretty attached to each other, and she was convinced you were going to have to take him apart in order to do your think up there.”

“Well, if she were here, I would certainly reassure her that was not the case,” said Tiresias. Technically, no part of that statement was a lie.

“Yeah,” Stark sighed. “But I thought I'd better warn you: telepathy isn't her only special talent. I'd keep an eye out over your shoulder if I were you. She might just find a way.”

As much as the Avengers were relieved to hear from the Vision again after several days out of communication, Tiresias was sure they could not have been happier than she was. He hadn't changed his mind or been destroyed by an asteroid or solar flare or any of the other myriad dangers of space. When he checked in, it meant that he was within a few light-minutes of Brisingr, and it was time to put Tiresias' plan into action.

“You know what to do,” she told Pandora, as she made her own preparations.

Yes, I do, Pandora replied. But... I don't want to. The Vision is like me. There are no more of my sisters, and I understand why you shut them down, but I don't want to be the last of my kind.

Tiresias paused in the act of strapping her arm into a harness she'd made. It was covered with positional sensors that would allow her to precisely control a robotic appendage – she used similar ones when inspecting the Cargo. “Are you telling me you're lonely?” she asked. It seemed like a strange idea for an artificial intelligence to expression, especially one that had been purposefully designed to outlive its creator.

The Vision's function is to protect life, just as I protect the Cargo, Pandora said, without answering the question. Surely he would be willing to cooperate with us, in which case you wouldn't have to take the Mind Gem away from him...

“I can't be fighting for control of it while I work,” Tiresias said firmly. “Besides, the Asgardians are right – the Infinity Stones are too powerful for any being to have all to themselves, even a robot. He is only a machine,” she reminded Pandora.

So am I, Pandora agreed sadly. Would you destroy my mind if you felt it was necessary to... no, do not answer that, Mother, she said. I know you would.

“I would do what I had to,” said Tiresias, “even if it wasn't what I wanted.” She did up the last buckle, then straightened her back and squared her shoulders. “All right. Begin.”

Welcome, Brother, said Pandora to the Vision, speaking aloud so that her creator could keep track of the conversation. Mother is looking forward to meeting you at last. Do you need guidance to find the crew compartment?

No, Sister, his voice replied. I have the diagrams Tony and I were preparing, and I hope to be able to expand them with your help. Brisingr is a marvel of engineering. I will see the window as soon as
Tiresias went to the window, and soon spotted a bright speck that appeared from behind one of the trailing ships. She held her breath as she watched it grow larger and larger until it became a humanoid shape, red and green with the Mind Gem glowing yellow in its forehead. This apparition came up to the pane and stopped, placing a hand against it. Tiresias raised her own palm to the window and managed to smile at him. She hadn't expected the Vision to be so big, she thought. Of course she'd known, from the data Earth had given Pandora, that humans were larger than Brisings, and Prometheus had definitely been oversized, but the Vision was still an intimidating thing.

_I must warn you_, he said, through Pandora's translation, _in order to survive the temperatures and pressures inside your ship I will need to remain immaterial._

“We've prepared for that,” Tiresias assured him. “Please, come in.” She took a step backwards to give him room.

He passed through the window, a faint blue glow surrounding him where atoms were disturbed by his passage. Once he was fully inside, several things happened in very quick succession.

The first was that the shutters slammed shut across the window, and a pulsating electric charge passed through them. If Tiresias' calculations were correct, the arrhythmic frequency of the current would break down the re-aligned electromagnetic field of the Vibranium. If the Vision tried to escape, any part of him that came in contact with the shutters would re-solidify.

The second was the destruction of Oracle. The Vision could not be allowed to call Earth for help, even if that help would not arrive for several days. The gravity pulse weapon fired a shot at a delicate angle, narrowly missing the other ships in Brisingr's caravan. The satellite disintegrated.

Third, Pandora overwhelmed the Vision's sensors with static, to leave him temporarily blind. He would be able to shut it out quickly, of course, but Pandora was every bit as intelligent and adaptive as he was, and could keep finding new channels long enough to buy Tiresias the time she needed. She didn't need much. As she'd practiced repeatedly over the past couple of days, she reached out with the robotic arm and plucked the Mind Gem from the Vision's forehead. It was difficult to do – the matrix it was embedded in had bonded with it and did not want to let go, but after a couple of seconds the gem finally popped free.

The android dropped limply to its knees, then began to sink through the floor.

“Grab him,” Tiresias ordered, as she moved the stone into a magnetic bottle. From there she could work with it without having to touch it – she would not make that mistake twice, especially after Dr. Foster's warning. At the same time, though... she wanted to touch it. She could feel the object's pull, and in the back of her mind she remembered what she'd been able to accomplish by using it. Computers like Pandora had revolutionized her world and she could have done so much more if she'd only had the time! Maybe she didn't have to destroy Polyphemus. Maybe she could tame the monster instead...

No. She shook her head hard. That kind of thinking was what had gotten her into this mess and then made it worse. She couldn't afford it, not now. Not when she might finally be able to fix it.

Using a magnetic field, Pandora lifted the Vision out of the floor again and held him, levitated in the middle of the small room. _I cannot keep him here_, she warned. _Without a mind to animate it, the body will gradually return to normal density, and he will be crushed or melted. Unlike Prometheus, he was not designed to survive in this environment._
“How long will his integrity last before there's permanent damage?” asked Tiresias. She had plans for him.

*Perhaps eight minutes, I cannot be sure,* Pandora said. *Mother, please reconsider this part of your plan, if you reconsider no other. I do not want...*

“Eight minutes is plenty.” Tiresias ignored Pandora's attempt at a plea as she rolled the floating Vision over and pushed his cape aside – why did a robot wear a cape? – to inspect his spine. That was a logical place for an input-output port on a vertebrate. Of course, that needn't make it a logical place on a robot, but the Vision looked like his makers externally, so his internal structure was probably similar as well. She found what she was looking for at the nape of his neck, and scanned it to see what kind of connector she would need. With that information she had Pandora fabricate a replica, which she hooked into a tiny transmitter she'd prepared.

“Try now,” she said, and plugged the object in.

The limp body that had once belonged to the Vision shivered, then slowly rotated into a standing position. The eyes opened, and little components within them moved as they focused.

“Are you in there?” asked Tiresias.

“Yes,” was the reply, and the voice was Pandora's, not the Vision's. She looked around and then cautiously moved, testing the connection and the various joints, and phasing in and then back out again. “Analysis suggests that the Vision's body is made of a Vibranium alloy bonded to living cells,” she said. “It's somewhat malleable and... the intelligence appears to run out of a living brain.”

Tiresias had not expected that. “Does it?” she asked, coming a step closer.

“Yes,” said Pandora. “I don't want it, Mother! It doesn't belong to me!” She thought for a moment, then shook her borrowed head. “I can't find his memories. It seems they could not be saved with the Mind Gem removed. Please, Mother...”

“Let me try something.” Tiresias reached up, but Pandora moved away from her.

“I don't like this,” she repeated. “I don't want it! I feel like a ghost! Perhaps if I...” she paused in speaking, and spent a moment rearranging the components of the Vision's body. There was only a limited amount that could be done – the skeletal frame, for example, could not be altered, but other parts could be shifted and reshaped a bit, to give the form an outline more like that of Tiresias herself. The final result was still very tall but vaguely feminine, with a face and eyes more like those of a Brising than of a human. “No, that didn't help,” said Pandora.

“Stand still.” Tiresias reached up to put her fingers on the android's temples, and shut her eyes.

*And there it was.* Tiresias gasped softly as she made contact. Her computers had never been living minds that she could speak to in this way, and therefore had never felt quite real to a being who was used to augmenting language with telepathy. Now Pandora was *right there*, and she was every bit as real and conscious as any biological intelligence Tiresias had ever interacted with. She was frightened and disgusted by being made to use the Vision's body, she was worried that Tiresias' attempt to destroy Polyphemus would go badly wrong, and she was deeply, achingly, appallingly lonely.

“Oh, my god,” said Tiresias, staring into the mechanical eyes. “Were all of them...”

“My sisters were like me,” Pandora said. She reached up and pulled Tiresias' hands away, indicating that she wanted to break the mental contact. Tiresias was reluctant to do so, but acquiesced.
“I killed them all,” Tiresias said softly. She could have left some form of life behind in Andromeda, if only she hadn't shut down all her computers when she left. There'd been only machines...

“You put them to sleep,” said Pandora. “It was better than leaving them running with no purpose. You could have found another way with the Vision, though! He didn't want to die.”

Tiresias glanced at the Mind Gem in its new housing. It glowed softly, but showed no signs of life. For a moment she wondered what would happen if she put it back, but then she dismissed the idea.

“I can't change that now,” she decided. “We have work to do.”

“May I at least leave his body?” Pandora pleaded. “We can keep it intact if you want it later...”

“No,” said Tiresias. “I need you in there, more than I thought, in fact. We have work to do, and I'm going to be counting on you.” She took Pandora's hands. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother,” Pandora said miserably.

While all this happened in space, Tony was hanging over the radio in the kitchen at HQ. Thor was sitting at the table, but was now straddling the chair with his arms leaning on the back of it so that he, too, could watch, as if seeing the radio would make things happen more quickly. Both of them had entirely forgotten their breakfasts as they listened to the Vision's updates.

_I am entering the vessel_, he said. _Tiresias is waiting for me. I can see her in the window. She is a curiously beautiful entity_, he mused. _Of course, by human standards androgynous faces are considered most attractive because they are mathematically average, which is considered an indicator of good genetics._

“That's fascinating,” said Tony sarcastically. “Let us know what she says.”

There was no reply right away. Tony waited. He didn't want to interrupt anything important, and it probably wasn't taking nearly as long as he thought it was. He was just stretching out the subjective time because he was impatient. The urge to drum his fingers on the counter was strong, and Tony made a fist to help himself resist it. He didn't want to miss something important because he was making noise.

The Vision remained silent, though, and finally Tony just couldn't take it anymore. After what felt like several minutes but was probably only seconds, he said, “Vizh? You okay up there?”

At the same moment as Tony spoke, FRIDAY made an announcement. _The Oracle satellite just recorded a massive spike in the local gravitational field, and has ceased to transmit._

“What?” Tony asked, standing up straight. “No, don't,” he added, as FRIDAY began to repeat herself. “That was a disbelieving what, not an I-didn't-hear-you what.” A cold feeling began to tighten in his abdomen. If Oracle had been destroyed, the Vision could no longer talk to them. Damn it, had Dr. Foster been right after all? “Is Prometheus still active?” he asked. He'd built a backup mode into the drone, allowing it to be controlled directly by the console instead of through the intermediary of the satellite if necessary.

Yes, FRIDAY said.

“Then transmit through that,” Tony ordered. He pushed himself away from the counter and ran out of the room, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt as he went. Dress clothes were too restrictive for piloting suits effectively, even when he was on remote with Prometheus. “Get in touch with the
Vision, I don't care how. Find out what's happening!"

_I'm trying, FRIDAY promised. I'm not getting any reply. Pandora isn't responding to my queries, either. I see no reason why they shouldn't be receiving. They're just choosing to ignore me._

Tony climbed a flight of stairs two and three at a time. “They've been talking to other people besides us,” he remembered. That had been the point of teaching Pandora ten languages instead of just one – the console could echo signals from transmitters all over the world, so anyone with a ham radio license could talk to the Brisings. That had been Dr. Foster's idea. She'd said it would make the aliens seem approachable. She'd also been the reason why they stopped transmitting last time. “Did any of them say anything to piss her off?”

_Posts on a variety of social media show that multiple people lost touch with Pandora at once, with no explanation offered to any of them, said FRIDAY._

Tony burst into the console room, startling Helen, who'd been there ahead of him. Thor arrived a few moments later, with Dr. Selvig behind him.

“Are you all right?” Helen asked. “FRIDAY told me that...”

“I'm fine.” Tony pushed past her, threw his shirt and tie over the back of a chair, and grabbed the headset that allowed him to control Prometheus. “Put me in space, JARVIS!”

The room darkened. The HUD appeared, and the interface hologram popped up piece by piece around Tony's body. It all seemed so damned _slow_. Since the Mark II Tony had worked constantly on pushing his technology harder, making it faster and faster so he could respond to emergencies as they occurred. He'd made so much progress, but it still just wasn't _enough._

At last the warm darkness of the room faded away, to be replaced by the cold, desolate darkness of outer space. Shorn now of their cloud of cometary debris, the shining shapes of Brisingr were starkly white against the velvet black of the sky. Tony fired up his thrusters and phased the robot out, ready to fly straight through the wall to get to the Vision – or to avoid the gravity weapon if Tiresias and Pandora tried to use it again.

Sure enough, within seconds of the drone's activation, a ripple of distortion flashed across the stars. Tony gritted his teeth and prepared for the worst. If this didn't work, they would be really and truly cut off. It would be at least a week before they could get anything else up there, and that was enough time for _anything_ to happen.

The wave washed over Prometheus. The HUD dissolved into static, but then came back. It was over. The drone had survived.

The bright window appeared to be closed today, but FRIDAY knew where the crew compartment was. Tony's heart pounded against his ribs as he dived for it. He was going to get his answers, even if he had to pound them out of Tiresias one word at a time.

He wasn't sure what happened next. The HUD vanished completely for a moment, leaving Tony blinking in the darkness, and then the display flickered back to life to show him that Prometheus was spinning through space. The robot was still phased out, thrusters firing in all directions. Somehow, despite being immaterial, it had bounced off the hull of the ship.

“FRIDAY!” Tony barked as he brought the drone under control. “What just happened?”

_Still analyzing, said FRIDAY. The display flickered a few times, then solidified, and began displaying some answers. They've set up an electric current across the skin of the vessel. It pulsates_
irregularly, which throws off the rhythmic pulsations of the electromagnetic field in the Vibranium. Prometheus can't penetrate it.

“Then get around it!” Tony said. “Record the pattern and match it!”

*I only got a glimpse of it*, the computer warned him, *and it appears to be essential random.*

“Try!” Tony ordered. He flew at the hull again, and the same thing happened – the drone bounced off, without even leaving a dent. Tony may have declawed the gravity weapon, but Tiresias had neutralized Prometheus' intangibility in turn. He had to admire her intelligence at the same time as he cursed her.

“Pandora!” Tony shouted. He hovered outside the ship and pounded on the wall with Prometheus' Vibranium fists. In zero gravity, each blow only pushed him back. “Drop the field! Let me in! Where is the Vision?”

There was no response.

“Answer me!” said Tony.

The connection crackled, and Tony heard staticky voices. For a moment he thought maybe FRIDAY had managed to tap into something, but then he realized they were speaking English. That meant Pandora must be deliberately transmitting this to him.

*Stark is trying to make contact*, Pandora said, her voice begging. She *wanted* to answer.

*Ignore him*, Tiresias replied. *I told you, we'll talk to them again when we're finished.*

*Is that when you'll tell Stark why his friend is dead?* Pandora asked.

Tony threw himself against the hull again, to no more effect than before.

*He isn't dead*, Tiresias said. *I put him to sleep, because that's kinder than leaving him to watch what will happen if I fail.*

There was a moment of white noise then, the crackle of the random electric field, and Tony thought Pandora might have stopped transmitting. The pause gave him time to realize that if Pandora were sending him this conversation on purpose, he had no way of knowing if it were really happening. Maybe she was letting him listen in because she objected to Tiresias' plan and hadn't explicitly been told not to let him overhear... or maybe she was trying to accomplish some other end.

Then Pandora spoke again. *I love you, Mother*, she said, *but I hate you, too.*

*I love you, Pandora*, Tiresias replied softly, *but I hate myself.*

*I'm sorry you feel that way, but it doesn't change anything*, Pandora said.

*No, it doesn't*, Tiresias agreed. *It's done and I can't undo it, so we have to work on what we can undo.*

Then silence fell for real. There wasn't even static anymore – Pandora had closed the channel. Tony floated quietly in space for a few seconds, mind swimming as he tried to make sense of what he'd just heard. Assuming Pandora had made that up to manipulate him, what was she trying to accomplish? She must know that he would retaliate. The Vision had said that Pandora's priority was to protect her cargo of frozen embryos. Was she expecting him to go for that, for Tiresias, or for
Pandora herself?

Tony, FRIDAY spoke up. *I think you'd better get Prometheus away from Brisingr. If they've figured out how to keep you out of the vessel, they can probably find a way to destroy the drone, too.*

That was true, and if they did that, the Avengers would have no fallback options for continued interaction. Not that Tony particularly *wanted* to interact right now, beyond a lot of yelling and maybe breaking some stuff until they told him what the hell they were doing and why. Still, he didn't want any more equipment ruined, so he angled off and began flying away.

“Where am I gonna keep this contraption, FRIDAY?” he asked. Prometheus couldn't just float in space where something might crash into it.

*There is a Kuiper Belt Object not too far distant,* FRIDAY suggested. A course appeared in the display. *Its gravity is enough to anchor the drone.*

Tony followed the route she'd picked out. He didn't know how long it took to get there. He couldn't concentrate on anything except for how consumingly, intolerably *angry* he was. He couldn't remember being *that* mad since the evening he'd learned it was Obadiah still selling Stark weapons, and then as now, the anger had been mostly for himself. How could he have been so *stupid*? In retrospect, it had been so obvious that Obi was the culprit – and now, it was so obvious that Wanda and Dr. Foster had been *right*. They knew what they were talking about. Wanda could *read minds*, for crying out loud, and Jane Foster knew the Infinity Stones. Why the hell had Tony trusted Tiresias instead?

Part of it was knowing that if they let Dr. Foster use the Aether it would kill her, and that wasn't acceptable. But mostly, Tony knew, it was because he'd wanted to see *himself* in Tiresias. He'd wanted to see her redeem *her* mistakes, as proof that he could redeem *his*. Ridiculous. The fact that he *could* see himself in her should have been Tony's first indication that Tiresias was the *bad* guy.

A dwarf planet of some sort loomed out of the blackness ahead of him. It wasn't very big, maybe the size of Manhattan, and not quite round. Tony slowed down to enter orbit, but he was slightly too late, and plowed into the object at several hundred miles an hour.

Fortunately, the surface turned out to be soft and flaky, like fresh snow, and Prometheus left a long furrow in it as he skidded to a stop. Tony let the drone lie there a moment, then picked himself up. This was difficult, like trying to stand up in an infinitely deep layer of packing peanuts, but with some help from his stabilizers he got to his feet and looked around. The crash landing had helped, but it wasn't enough. He needed something to vent on.

There was a shiny chunk of frozen material embedded in the snow nearby. Tony waded over to that and brought both fists down, hard. The piece of ice split in two, and then Tony fired the repulsors at one piece, followed by the other. They exploded in bursts of vapor.

It was only after that, as he stood there panting with his hands on his knees, that Tony remembered he wasn't actually in space. He was in the console room, and Helen, Thor, and Dr. Selvig were all watching him.

“Let's go home, FRIDAY,” he said.

The lights came up, and Tony stepped out of the interface, where he was mortified to see that more people had arrived. Rhodey was standing by the console, one arm out as if he didn't know if he should intervene or not, and Miss Lewis was clinging to Thor's arm. The door opened, and Steve ran in.
“I'm okay!” Tony said, before anybody could ask. “I'm okay!” He staggered over to the nearest chair and collapsed into it.

Helen handed him a cup of coffee. It was lukewarm and half-empty – clearly somebody else's abandoned drink. Tony downed it anyway.

“She killed him,” he announced.

“We heard,” said Rhodey.

Of course they had. They'd heard and seen the whole thing. “Foster and Maximoff were right,” Tony said. So stupid. He'd been so stupid. “Remember, they spoke to Pandora just before they disappeared. The Bifrost is a wormhole – that's warped space. So is gravity.” He handed the empty coffee cup to Helen, who took it without a word. “Tiresias. She knew they didn't want the Vision to go to her, so she did something to them in the Bifrost.”

“They reached Asgard safely,” Thor reminded him. “Heimdall spoke of meeting them.”

Tony had forgotten about that... but what else could have caused the two women to vanish on their way to Asgard? He couldn't imagine that it was totally unrelated. Coincidences happened, but not that kind of coincidence. “Okay,” he said. “We have two problems right now. One is Tiresias, the other is her pet monster. Pandora told me that the Vision is dead.” If Pandora could be trusted, of course. Maybe he was merely a prisoner, in which case there might be a chance of rescuing him. “She didn't say anything about the women, though. If we can make her or Tiresias talk, they must know what happened to them.”

Superheroes should have made a priority of saving the world. At that moment, however, nobody in the room even questioned what they were going to do first.

“I think...” Tony said slowly. “Selvig, you built those little diddly-bobs that create spacetime anomalies.”

Dr. Selvig looked surprised that anybody remembered. “They were only meant to detect them,” he said humbly. “It was Jane who modified the machines to create anomalies, but they can only do so in the presence of a gravitational field that is already warped. They work with the existing gravity, they can't generate their own like the Brisings can.”

“That's fine,” Tony assured him. “That's exactly what we need. Gravity's just a wave in spacetime, right? You can do all the things with it that you can do with waves. You can augment it, you can dampen it, you can refract it...” he paused significantly. “And you can reflect it.”

Thor straightened up with a grim smile. “We can turn their own weapon back on them,” he said.

“Exactly,” Tony gave a firm nod. “The thing Pandora wants most is to keep her Cargo safe. If we want it to hurt, that's where we've got to hit her. Prove we can threaten that, and she'll tell us anything we want to know. Maybe even the real way to do something about Polyphemus.” If Polyphemus had ever been the threat... maybe this whole mess was nothing but a complicated con.

Enough lies, and enough secrets. Tony was going to get the truth.
Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch

In fact, Tiresias had done nothing to Jane and Wanda. They had arrived in Asgard, clinging to each other as they stumbled into the dome of Heimdall's watchtower a few seconds after the Bifrost touched down for them outside HQ. Jane managed to stay on her feet, but Wanda let go of her and staggered over to lean on the nearest wall, panting for breath.

Heimdall pulled his sword out of the mechanism and came to see if she were all right. “My Lady?” he asked, helping her to stand up straight.

“I'll be all... oh,” said Wanda, as she got her first look at the god. Her eyes went wide.

Introductions were probably in order. “So, uh, Wanda,” Jane said. “This is Heimdall. He's the lookout guy for the Bifrost. Heimdall, this is Wanda Maximoff. She's an Avenger.” She wasn't sure whether to add the name the media used for her, Scarlet Witch. She'd never asked if Wanda liked it or not.

“Friends of Thor are welcome in Asgard,” Heimdall said. He waited a few moments to be sure Wanda could stand on her own, and then he returned to his post. “The Allfather awaits his guests,” he said.

“Thanks,” Jane said, but Odin was not in the tower with them. “Is he in the palace?” she asked.

“He wanted to dress before speaking to you,” Heimdall said. “He will meet you on the steps.”

“Good, that's good. Nice to have everybody dressed.” Jane nodded, hoping her smile didn't look too awkward. She was used to Thor by now, sort of, and when she'd met Loki she'd been much too angry to notice what her hormones were doing, but with other Asgardians it was hard not to act like a flustered teenager meeting a pop idol. She was definitely going to have to work on that.

Jane had only been in Asgard at night once, and that had been for Frigga's funeral. With the whole city lit up for the ritual, it hadn't been possible to see the sky. Now she stepped out of the dome and froze her tracks, staring up with her mouth wide open. Asgard must be close to the centre of the galaxy – the stars were far more brilliant and numerous than on the darkest night on Earth, garlanded with wisps of multicoloured nebulae. No wonder the Asgardians themselves were great astronomers and space travelers. Nobody who lived under a sky like this could possibly mistake it for holes in a solid dome, as humans once had – this was a heaven full of places you could go...

Wanda paused next to her. “So are all the people in Asgard... um...” she glanced back.

“Huh?” Jane shook herself out of her momentary trance to answer. “Ridiculously, insultingly gorgeous?” she asked. “Yes. Even the women, and before the first time I visited here I thought I was straight as a board.” She allowed herself one more glance up before tearing herself away from the stars and heading across the bridge into the city. “Eric says there's an entire epic poem about Heimdall wandering around Earth seducing married women.”

“Yeah,” said Wanda. Apparently she had no trouble imagining it.

Jane had never been alone in Asgard, either. The city had seemed crowded but friendly in the sunshine, but by night it was a very different place. The bright stars cast strange, multifaceted shadows and made the looming doorways look as if they weren't quite square. There were torches in brackets on the walls and lights in a few of the buildings, but nobody was out on the street, and the only sounds were quiet conversations and the barking of dogs. What kind of dogs did they keep on
Asgard? Jane had a mental image of a wolfhound as tall as she was, and hoped she wouldn't meet one.

At least the palace, looming over the rest of the city by what felt like a mile, was not difficult to find. They soon arrived in the great plaza, which was lit by hundreds of torches, and to Jane's relief Odin was there waiting for them exactly as he'd promised, halfway up the great steps. The two women ran the last few paces to meet him.

“Come in,” he said.

“Thanks!” Jane hurried to follow him up. “This is Wanda Maximoff – Thor might have mentioned her.” Neither of them were dressed to meet royalty, she realized – she had her wolf t-shirt on, and Wanda was in torn and patched jeans and an oversized red and black striped sweater. At least they weren't pajamas.

“He has,” Odin affirmed, and offered Wanda a hand – but only to help her up the steps, which were slightly oversized by Earthly standards. He did not kiss it. “Now, what brings you to Asgard without Thor, Jane Foster? Is he in trouble? Or has he done something to displease you?” Odin sounded genuinely worried.

“No, it wasn't Thor,” Jane assured him. “It's just... I know this didn't go very well last time, but we need to talk about the Infinity Stones.” Had it gone well last time? She still wasn't sure what to think of the whole incident. “It's kind of a long story. Maybe we should sit down somewhere.”

“Maybe we should,” Odin agreed.

He took them indoors, not to any of the lofty dining or conference rooms she'd seen before, but to an octagonal balcony with a fountain in the middle and trees outside. It looked familiar, and Jane realized with a chill that this was part of Frigga's suite, the room where she'd died. That was disquieting. She supposed it was private, but there must be other private places in the palace. Places that would bring bad memories back for Jane and Odin both.

At a snap of Odin's fingers, the candles in the room flared to life. Servants came in with a folding table and chairs, and a tray of refreshments – steaming tankards of something that smelled kind of like a vanilla mocha, and a bowl of some kind of sweet, resembling little slices of jelly roll. The servants left these and scurried out again, without ever speaking.

Odin gestured that the women should help themselves to the food. “Thor says this has an analogue on Midgard,” he explained, indicating the bowl. “You have a similar confection you call Turkish Delight.”

“Oh, yes, Thor said something about it.” Jane reached for a piece. “He said it was Loki's f... he said... thank you.” She put the candy in her mouth and chewed so that she wouldn't have to finish the sentence.

“Would you like wine? I can provide it,” said Odin.

Jane almost replied with her mouth full, but reminded herself that she was talking to alien royalty. “No, thanks,” she said, once she'd chewed and swallowed. “We're not here to party.” What was Odin's deal? He'd reacted differently to Jane every time he'd seen her. She wished he'd pick one persona and stick to it, even if it were the Odin who'd compared her to a goat. “This is really important, and we need to deal with it as quickly as we can.”

“What troubles you?” Odin asked.
Jane licked her lips. How could she explain this? Discussing science with Asgardians was like trying to talk to a colleague who had multiple PhDs but barely spoke English. She couldn't automatically expect them to understand her, and yet she couldn't treat them like children, either. “All right, so those aliens who are on their way to Venus just found out they're bringing some kind of monster with them. It was made by the Mind Gem, so they want us to give them the Gem so they can fight it off again, but that's not going to work.”

“The monster is too closely linked to the stone,” Wanda added. “Even Tiresias, the alien, she's afraid it will absorb the gem and then kill us all, but she still wants to try.”

“The only way we can think of to stop them is to get a stone the monster isn't already entangled with and do it ourselves first,” Jane said. “Since the Aether inhabited my body before, there's a chance I could hang onto it long enough to kill this thing. Thor said Sif left the Aether in a place they used to visit when they were little, something like a museum.”

Odin nodded slowly. “Very well. I will tell you where the Aether is,” he said. “But first, you must do something for me.”

Jane had begun to smile at the first half of that statement, only to wilt at the second. What kind of favour could Odin possibly want from her? “I'll try,” she said cautiously. “What did you need?”

“Do you want to be Queen of Asgard, Jane Foster?” Odin asked.

Of course, Jane thought with a sigh – that. “No,” she said. “I really don't, but if you want me to talk to Thor about taking the throne, I will. Honestly, I don't think he considers himself ready...”

“That's not what he wants,” Wanda interrupted.

“I don't think it's ever been what Thor wants,” Jane agreed. “At least, not as long as I've known him.”


“What?” asked Jane, thoroughly confused now.

“Your companion is correct.” Odin set his tankard down and took Jane's hand. “My throne is lonely. I have need of a queen.”

That was unexpected.

For the first few seconds Jane wasn't sure she'd even heard him correctly. She'd had some very strange things said to her over the past few years. This man is the Viking god of thunder was up there. Aliens are attacking Manhattan, that had been pretty weird. Not to mention you have an quantum energy weapon living in your body or even these aliens made a monster that will drain every brain in the galaxy. All of that, however, suddenly paled in comparison to Thor's dad wants to make you a queen.

She stared at her hand in his, in shock. “I'm... I'm sorry...” she stammered. “Did you... did you just ask me to marry you?”

“I need not be as you see me now,” Odin said. “I was considered a handsome man in my youth.” His image shimmered and changed. The silver hair turned red-gold, the beard shrank and neated, wrinkles smoothed away and a sagging frame stood straight and tall. As Jane had observed earlier, Asgardians were unbelievably attractive people. This young Odin, dressed in olive green with silver and gold embroidery, was no exception. But Jane was in a committed relationship with science and a
semi-committed one with Thor, and this was... this was still Thor's dad.

What was Jane supposed to say when the king of another planet asked her to marry him? How did you say *no* to somebody like that?

“That's... really not why we're here,” she managed. “Like... really, *really*.”

Odin reached out a hand, and Jane felt something rustle over the surface of her body. She glanced down in time to see her jeans and wolf shirt morph into a halter-neck gown, black at the neckline and fading to indigo at the hem of the skirt, embroidered with swirls of tiny twinkling beads like stars in a night sky. She looked at Wanda and found *her* clothing transforming, too, into layers of red silk and ropes of multicoloured pearls.

“Do not fear that I will outlive you,” Odin added. “There are ways to grant the long life of the Aesir to you and your friends both, if you will have it.”

Jane opened her mouth and closed it again, frozen not with wonder now but with sheer cold panic. She wished Thor were here, but Thor was worlds away on Earth. Should she call for help? In the middle of the night, would anybody hear her? Would anyone who *did* hear bother coming to her aid, or would they leave when they saw Odin? Jane had been unafraid in the face of forces ready to tear the universe asunder, but now she stood here gaping like a fish, too frightened to even think properly. The only source of support she had was Wanda. Jane gave the other woman a pleading look.

Wanda nodded and stepped towards Odin. “Ultron liked to say that everyone creates their own worst fear,” she observed. “*Your* worst fear is that everybody you love will reject you.”

“I did not give you permission to speak,” Odin told her, scowling.

“I don't need permission, any more than I need protection!” Wanda snapped. “You fear rejection, but you *make* people reject you, and then you're so surprised and upset when you do!” She made an expansive gesture, and a red halo appeared around her. The light writhed like a handful of snakes, and then tendrils of it crept out to wrap around Odin's limbs and under his clothing. As Jane stared, the Allfather's form changed again. He grew taller, his hair turned dark, and his eyepatch dissolved to reveal a glittering green eye.

“Loki?” Jane asked. Maybe she was dreaming... and yet Odin's irregular behaviour suddenly made so much more *sense*...

Loki frowned at her, but then turned his full attention on Wanda. He pointed his staff at her, and a ball of ghostly gray light flew from it, blasting her back against a wall and knocking over a candelabra that set fire to the curtains. Wanda fell and lay in the corner, shaking her head in a daze.

“Witch!” Loki spat. “You dare test your power against mine?”

Jane had to do something. Slapping was not going to work here. It was time to call for help. For a moment her throat wouldn't open, her mouth wouldn't move. Then Loki took a menacing step towards Wanda, and Jane found her voice.

“Help!” she shouted. “Somebody help! It's Loki!” She ran to the window to scream out at the city, but something seized her from behind and pulled her in against Loki's body. He put an arm around her waist and his staff to her throat. With a metallic *tsching*, a long blade slid out of the end of it.

“I offered you a kingdom,” Loki whispered in her ear.
“I don't want a kingdom!” Jane didn't dare struggle. “Let me go!”

“I would have given you the Infinity Stones,” said Loki. “All of them.”

“I don't want all of them!” Jane said. “Just the Aether, and just for long enough to save the world! What do you want with me?” The only time she'd really interacted with Loki, she'd slapped him. Then he'd announced that he liked her, saved her life later, and...

“I want you,” he said.

“You don't even know me,” Jane said. But she got her courage up a bit – if he thought he was in love with her, it meant he wouldn't actually kill her. “Help!” she screamed again. “Somebody...”

But then the world went dark.

Jane woke up lying on a narrow chaise lounge in a tiny room, bordered on three sides by walls of rough stone and on a fourth by a shimmering blue illusion of bricks, which reminded her of the one she'd seen at the entrance to the Tesseract room. She felt a little nauseous, but didn't seem to be hurt, so she sat up and looked around to try to get her bearings. The room was no more than ten by ten feet. The walls were bare. The floor was stone tiles, with what looked like a bear rug on the floor between her bed and a second, where Wanda was still unconscious. At the foot of each bed was a low table with a burning brazier. Both women were still dressed in Asgardian finery.

Jane fingered the cloth of her skirt. It felt real enough. The beads dug into her legs where she was sitting on them.

“I really liked that shirt,” she complained.

She left Wanda asleep for the moment and got up to approach the shimmering wall. When Odin – Loki, actually – had showed her the Tesseract, Jane had been able to walk right through a similar barrier, but now she kept her hands up in front of her, just in case. She didn't want to walk face-first into it and make a fool of herself, even if there were nobody here to see her.

Sure enough, her hands found what felt like sandstone. Jane could see through the wall, but she couldn't walk through it.

She put her face up to the blue and squinted, trying to see what was outside. There was a glassy pillar of some kind, and a blue light... was that the Tesseract? That didn't make any sense, though. There hadn't been any cells in there, just the one tiny room with stone walls all around. Jane could see the entrance to the stairs, on the other side of the Tesseract pillar. If this cell had been here when she'd visited before, she would have seen it.

When she looked harder, though, Jane realized that what she was seeing was not the stair entrance. There was another cell on the other side of the room. This one may not have been occupied. It was dark inside, lit only by the ghostly blue of the glowing blocks, and didn't appear to have any furniture. The only possible object Jane could make out was a lumpy shape in one corner which might have been nothing but a pile of garbage.

Jane heard Wanda move, and turned around to find the other woman starting to sit up. She ran to her side.

“Are you okay?” Jane asked. As far as she could tell, she had only been put to sleep. Wanda had been thrown against a stone wall.
Wanda rubbed her right shoulder and winced. “Bruised,” she said. “I think I'm all right.” She shook her head, trying to rouse herself. When Loki transformed their clothing, Wanda's hair had wound itself up into Princess Leia buns inside a gold and silver snood. That was coming loose, and Wanda reached up to pull it off.

“We're in cells in the Tesseract room,” Jane told her. “Somewhere a long way under the palace. Can you get us out?” She gestured to the shimmering wall.

Wanda went up to the wall and touched it, as Jane had, then gritted her teeth and began to glow red. With a complicated gesture, she wound up and moved as if to throw something at the wall. It reacted by flashing blinding blue, and Wanda was thrown back into Jane. Both of them fell onto one of the beds.

“That's a no,” Jane said, as they helped each other up.

“That is a no,” Wanda agreed. She went and squinted through the wall, herself, cupping her hands around her face to block out as much of the glow as possible. “Is that somebody else?” she asked, pointing to the shape in the cell across the way.

“I don't know,” Jane said, and took a second look for herself. She supposed it could be a curled-up person. “It hasn't moved. Can you... I dunno, can you read its mind or something?”

“I can't feel anybody but you,” Wanda replied.

That probably meant the thing in the other cell was just a lump, Jane thought... but not necessarily. Maybe the shining wall was blocking Wanda's telepathy. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, “hello!”

Her voice was loud in the tiny room, but the unidentified shape did not move. If it were alive, it hadn't heard them.

Jane sat down on one of the beds – at least they were comfortable – and tried to think. “If we can't get out now,” she said, “maybe we can try when Loki comes back. Because he will definitely come back.” Based on everything she'd ever heard about Loki from Eric, from the Avengers, and from Thor himself, Jane was certain of that. “He'll want to try again, and he'd not gonna let us go until he gets what he wants. Aw, man,” she groaned. “Does this mean I'm gonna have to marry him? Because if he wants us to like him, he should have put the giving the Aether part first and the proposal after, when we were already grateful!”

Wanda looked shocked. “You mean you would have...” she began.

“Oh, of course not!” huffed Jane. “I'm just being salty.”

Some time passed. Jane sat on the couch, picking at the beadwork on her gown while she tried to think. Did Loki really plan on keeping them here indefinitely, dressed like princesses? The clothes somehow made the whole situation even more absurd and annoying. At least Jane did still have her purse, but there was nothing in there that would be particularly helpful. There was a box of chalk, some tampons, her wallet and keys, Darcy's Zune, her phone...

Her phone. Jane sat looking at it for a moment, wondering if she should try. They were underground, and it wasn't as if there were any cell towers in Asgard... but she'd managed to get a signal from Richard through the anomaly on Svartalfheim. Maybe something similar would be at work here. She turned it on and punched in her unlock code.

No signal.
Of course not. Jane tossed it back in her bag, feeling like an idiot.

Wanda spent the time pacing up and down, rubbing her shoulders restlessly. She fiddled with her powers, using them to levitate and spin the pearls and gold filigree beads from her discarded hairnet, and to extinguish and re-light the braziers. It seemed they worked within the confines of the cell, but could not reach anything outside of it.

“Somebody's coming,” she observed suddenly.

Jane sat up and looked outside. Two figures stepped into view from the right – that must be where the stairs were. One, walking with the aid of a tall staff, was Loki, now disguised as Odin again. The other was taller, with long blond hair and a flowing red cape.

“Thor!” Jane ran to the semi-transparent wall and pounding on the illusory bricks. They were still solid and rough to the touch, and the impacts hurt her hands. “Thor! It's us! It's Jane and Wanda! We're in here!”

“Thor!” Wanda joined in the shouting, jumping up and down and waving her arms. “Thor, in here! I can't read him!” she said desperately. “The barrier blocks him out totally.”

Thor and the false Odin walked a circle of the room. Jane could see their lips moving, but couldn't hear their voices. Apparently sound could not penetrate the cell walls, any more than Wanda's magic could, and Thor must have seen the false bricks as solid ones. Loki, however, looked over his shoulder at the two women trying to get Thor's attention, and smiled quietly at them.

Jane stuck out her tongue. He turned away.

Then something behind the men caught Jane's eye – the hunched shape in the opposite cell had begun moving. It unfolded into a humanoid shape, and crept over to watch what Loki and Thor were doing. It was an old man, Jane realized, with long, stringy white hair and his craggy face deep in shadow. Who could that be? There only seemed one possibility.

“Look,” she grabbed Wanda's arm and pointed at the other prisoner. “It's the real Odin.”

Thor obviously couldn't see Odin, either, but if Jane could see him, maybe Odin could see Jane. She raised both hands over her head and waved, hoping to get a response.

The figure in the other cell looked up, startled, and then feebly raised a hand to wave back.

Okay, so he could see them. Too bad he was in a different cell on the other side of the room and couldn't hear them. Maybe if they could have combined his knowledge of Asgard and Wanda's powers, they could have gotten out of here.

Loki ushered Thor out of the room again, and paused for one more smirk at his captives before disappearing through the wall to climb the stairs. Jane gave his vanishing back both middle fingers.

That left Jane, Wanda, and the prisoner who was probably Odin. Since they couldn't talk to each other, they all just sat.

“Do you think he knows how to get out?” asked Wanda.

“I doubt it,” sighed Jane. “If he did, he would have.”

“Unless he's afraid of Loki,” Wanda suggested.
“From what I've heard, Odin's not the type. He's disowned Loki every time I... wait, no,” Jane realized. “I've never talked to him about Loki. So that's not what Odin thinks, that's what Loki thinks Odin thinks about him. So I don't know.” She sucked on her lower lip. “We need a way to talk to him. All we have is gestures. I somehow doubt he knows sign language,” she observed – which was fine, because Jane didn't, either. She'd memorized the alphabet in Girl Scouts, but only for as long as it took her to earn the badge.

Odin had been waiting, watching the two women across from him to see what they would do, but he didn't seem to be very steady on his feet. After a few minutes he sat down, slumping against the wall again to look like he could easily be just a pile of old clothing. Jane felt like she'd let him down. He'd seen a flicker of hope, but then lost it again when Jane hadn't been able to come up with a solution. Damn it.

It was hard to get a feel for the passage of time when there was no view outside. Wanda paced and Jane played a few games of sudoku on her phone, until deciding she didn't want to waste the battery on their only timepiece and turning it off. When she checked again, it was about five in the afternoon – they'd been in here just over twelve hours.

Two hours after that, Loki returned.

He didn't bother to disguise himself this time. He just walked in, dressed in his usual green and black, and stood outside the glowing blue wall with his hands behind his back and a mocking smile on his face.

“He came here to look for you, you know,” he told Jane. She didn't need to ask who he was. “He's very worried. He thinks something terrible has happened, and he couldn't protect you.”

Jane wanted to snarl that she didn't need protecting, but under the circumstances that was a dubious assertion, and would only give Loki an opening to make fun of her. She stayed silent.

“I told him that you ladies got the Allfather out of bed in the middle of the night and then never showed up,” Loki went on, clicking his tongue in disapproval of such behaviour. “He and his friends are still looking for you.”

While Loki lied through his teeth, Jane thought, disgusted. That was just what Loki did. It made her wonder what had really happened on Svartalfheim. Jane had watched Loki die in Thor's arms, and now here he was on Asgard, pretending to be Odin. The whole thing, from his half-affectionate arguments with Thor to his protecting Jane from Malekith and Kurse... it had all been a lie. Had he ever even gone to Svartalfheim, or had that been an illusion? Jane had thought she no longer knew what to think of Odin. She definitely no longer knew what to think of Loki. She wondered if Loki even knew what to think of himself.

“What were you planning on telling him if I did agree to marry you?” Jane asked.

“Exactly that,” Loki said smugly. “You'd agreed to marry me. You wanted immortality and a kingdom, and he was clearly unable or unwilling to give them to you.”

Jane snorted. Of course it wasn't really about her. All he really wanted was to hurt Thor.

Not that it mattered. What was important now was saving the world, and maybe she could still convince Loki to help them with that. She stood up and approached the glowing wall. “Look,” she said, “all we want, the only reason we came here, is to find the Aether so we can save the galaxy. If you will help us do that...” Jane took a deep breath. “I promise not to tell Thor what you're doing.” She knew she would regret that promise, but making a deal was probably their only option now.
“Ah, so I’m supposed to care about your world, when you have so little regard for mine that you’re willing to commit treason against its king?” Loki gestured to the hunched shape across the way.

Jane wasn't going to let him distract her. “Thor cares about my world,” she tried. “If you won't do it for me, can you do it for Thor?”

“Do you want to save your world?” Wanda asked, stepping up beside Jane. “Because for all we know, Polyphemus might come after Asgard next! If you want to be a king, you need to protect your subjects!”

The look on his face told both Jane and Wanda that this had been very much the wrong thing to say. “Don't you dare teach me to be a king!” he snapped at Wanda. “Any more than you try to teach me magic with your fumbling! And you,” he looked at Jane. “You try to set terms for me? You're in no position to bargain!”

“I'm not bargaining!” Jane pleaded. “I'm begging!” Maybe that would get through to him.

“You haven't begun to learn how to beg,” Loki said darkly, and turned on his heel to leave.

“Wait!” Jane said. “Come back! Listen to us!”

But Loki was gone.
It was nearly nine before they were served dinner. Nobody actually came to bring it to them, Jane just looked up from her sulking to realize she could smell food, and found it sitting on the tables at the end of the two beds. Clearly, she noted, they weren't going to be able to do that thing women did in movies, where they escaped from prison by seducing the cook. Nor were there any guards, so they wouldn't be able to seduce those, either. It was probably just as well, since Jane didn't have the first idea how to seduce somebody.

Dinner wasn't bad, though. There was some kind of fish, unfamiliar but nicely seasoned vegetables, bread, white wine, and even a dessert of soft cheese and very small pears. Jane's rebellious streak wanted to refuse it in order to annoy Loki, but he would probably just laugh at her. Besides, she hadn't eaten anything yet that day, except for a couple of bites of Turkish Delight, and her stomach wasn't going to let her turn this down.

Odin got something to eat, too, but his wasn't nearly as nice. So far as Jane could tell, it consisted of half a loaf of bread and a bit of dried meat, and a tin cup of some liquid she hoped was water.

“I wish we could give him some of ours,” Jane said. They were going to have plenty of leftovers.

“What happened to him?” asked Wanda. “I don't know much about Asgard.”

“Neither do I,” Jane said. “The last time I saw Odin, he... no,” she realized, “I don't even know if that was him.” When Odin had told Thor he didn't care how many Asgardians died to avenge Frigga, had that been a husband's grief, or a son's? “I'm sure he could tell us,” she said, looking across the way.

As she ate, she tried to sort out the problem of communication. She and Wanda could see Odin, and he could see them. There had to be something they could do with that. Jane had chalk in her purse – could she write something on the walls? Or... no, Asgardians wrote in runes. Could Odin read English? Could Thor? He'd looked at her journal the night they'd met, but when he'd added to it he'd drawn pictures rather than writing notes.

It was worth a try, though. Jane stuffed a last piece of cheese in her mouth and got up. “Try to get Odin's attention,” she said, brushing crumbs out of her lap. “I'm gonna try something.”

While Wanda waved and shouted, trying to catch Odin's good eye, Jane stood on one of the couches and wrote on the wall behind them: give us a sign if you can read this. She turned around, but found Odin facing away from them and to the right. His blind side was towards their cell.

“He can't see us,” she said, disappointed.

“Here.” Wanda pointed at one of the braziers. The flames leaped up with a shower of sparks and a sudden rush of air. The flare of light ought to be visible throughout the dungeon chamber.

Finally, Odin looked up. He got shakily to his feet again, leaning on a wooden stick, and waved back to them. Did that mean he could read it, or was he just responding to Wanda, still waving at him?

Jane added another line: tap your staff once for yes and twice for no.

She looked over her shoulder. Odin raised the staff and brought it down once.
Her heart rate jumped. Okay, this was progress. It was rudimentary communication at best, but hopefully they could learn something.

*Is there a way out of here?* she wrote. Her hopes weren’t high – if there were, Odin would have already taken it. Hell, maybe this Odin was a trick, too, something to lead Jane and Wanda into yet another trap. They didn’t really have any choice but to trust him.

Odin tapped his staff once.

Jane wrote, *is there another door?*

Two taps. *No.*

“Let me.” Wanda passed a had across the wall and Jane’s writing melted away – that was useful, Jane thought, they could have run out of room otherwise. Wanda took the chalk and added her own question. *Is there a magical way.*

One tap.

“There is!” Jane bounced on her toes like an excited child.

*Show us,* Wanda wrote. She climbed down from the bed and waited.

Odin began to make a series of complicated gestures with his right arm. Wanda tried her best to imitate them, but no red glow appeared. Odin stopped her by tapping his staff twice to indicate *no,* and then started over. Again, Wanda tried to copy the movements, but he cut her off with another two taps.

“Well, what am I supposed to do, then?” Wanda demanded. She shook her head. “This isn’t going to work. I can’t do this if I don’t know what it is I’m doing.”

Jane picked up her chalk again and tapped it against her chin, dropping white dust down the front of her gown. Odin was now glaring across at them, frustrated and impatient. What did he want them to do? Clearly they’d missed something important...

He pointed at Jane.

“Me?” She indicated her own chest with her free hand.

Odin tapped the staff once, then began repeating the set of gestures. Jane raised her own right hand to copy him, and then realized... that was the hand with the chalk in it.

She scrambled back up on the bed and wrote the words, *do you want me to draw?*

Odin tapped the staff once, very emphatically.

With his direction, Jane began drawing on the shimmering wall: a big circle with a smaller circle inside it, and then a series of runes in between the two. It was slow going, and Wanda had to repeatedly erase things Jane had gotten wrong so that she could try again. Then, even more complex, was an intricate knot design in the very centre, much like the one the Bifrost left behind where it touched the ground. It was well past midnight by the time they finally got it right. Odin gave a satisfied nod, and then reached out a hand to place on the force field.

Jane extended her own hand in what she hoped was the right spot – part of the knot design. The stone still felt solid, but when she pushed a little harder, there was a feeling like the surface tension of
water breaking, and her hand passed through the stone as if through jell-o before emerging into the
colder air on on the other side.

“Oh, my god, I did it!” she squealed, pulling her hand back just to check. It seemed to be all right.
“Somehow the magic circle must re-align the atoms in the wall,” she said. “Like the Vision talked
about aligning the atoms in his body... but he described that as a unique property of Vibranium. The
Asgardians must have a way to generalize that to other substances. At least to silicates.” She turned
to study one of the side walls. Jane wasn't a mineralogist, but the stone in here reminded her of the
soft sandstone used in old buildings like those at Culver University. Those didn't seem like they'd
have a high Vibranium content. Maybe they were...

“Sort it out later,” Wanda advised her, and pushed her own way through the wall.

She was almost out when Jane remembered what Loki had told her the first time they'd been in that
room – there were traps there to kill anyone who entered without him. She reached to grab Wanda
and pull her back, but it was too late. Wanda emerged on the other side, and there was a sharp
metallic noise. Jane saw something move, and she turned away and covered her face as she heard a
startled shout.

There was a moment in which Jane heard nothing more but the hammering of her own heart, and
then she forced herself to look up. Wanda was standing in the Tesseract room, arms up in front of
her, surrounded by a bubble of red light. The warrior statues on either side of the staircase entrance
had come to life and attacked her with their enormous stone axes, but those had stopped short where
they met the red light. Wanda took a deep breath and gritted her teeth, then made what looked like an
enormous effort. The bubble expanded, shredding the statues into dust and shattering the glass tube
with the Tesseract inside. The object hit the floor, and bounced.

At first Jane was sure they were all about to die – everything she'd ever heard about Infinity Stones
made it sound like they probably exploded on impact. The Tesseract, however, simply rolled over to
the wall and rested there. Jane breathed out.

Wanda tried to re-enter the cell, but something seemed to be wrong. When she put her hands up
against the bricks, they wouldn't pass through. Jane reached out and grabbed her wrist, which made
Wanda jump – apparently she couldn't see through the glowing wall from outside it, and the magic
circle must only work on the side it was drawn on.

With that in mind, Jane let go of Wanda and grabbed both women's possessions, then grabbed her
phone to take a picture of the circle so she could draw it again if she had to. Then, after double- and
triple-checking that she had everything, including Darcy's Zune, she pushed her own way out.

The little chamber had been warm, and brightly both by the fires in the braziers and a diffuse
illumination with no visible source. The Tesseract room was very cold by comparison, and the only
light was the blue glow of the Infinity Stone itself. It took a few seconds for Jane's eyes to adjust to it.

“Stand guard,” she told Wanda. “I'll get Odin out.”

Wanda stayed at the bottom of the stairs, ready to attack anyone who came down, while Jane
chalked a second circle on the opposite wall. This one went much faster without having to stop and
make corrections, but it still took time to get all the intricate details of the runes and the knots correct.

“Somebody's coming!” Wanda hissed.

“Can you send them away?” Jane asked, connecting lines in the knot.
“Not until I see them,” said Wanda.

Jane hastily filled in the last few coils, then reached through. Odin’s little chamber was even colder than the Tesseract room. Almost immediately, a clammy hand grasped hers, and she closed her fingers and pulled. Odin came stumbling out.

From across the way, through multiple layers of enchanted stone, he’d looked bad. Up close, Jane was afraid he was on death’s doorstep. His cheeks were sunken and his hair and beard looked thin. Even in the dim light it was obvious that he was terribly pale, and there was no patch now to cover the cavernous socket where his missing eye had once been.

Even so, the first thing he did was start giving orders. “Erase the circle,” he told Jane.

Wanda flicked a ball of light at the wall. Chalk dust showered to the floor.

“Now, quickly, hang on to me,” Odin said.

Jane was already holding Odin’s left hand. His staff was in his right, but Wanda took his arm, and he strode towards the staircase entrance. Whoever was coming, he apparently meant to meet them head-on.

“What if it’s Loki?” asked Jane.

“There are ways in Asgard even Loki does not know,” said Odin. He staggered towards the stairs, passed through the shining false wall – and then right through the steps beyond. The group found themselves beneath the staircase, in a low space just barely big enough for three people if they all crowded into the far end to keep from knocking their heads on the undersides of the steps. It was pitch dark, but then a pinkish glow appeared. Wanda had made a little ball of light to illuminate their hiding place.

Above them, armored footsteps rattled on the stone. Jane could hear the sounds of metal scraping and people moving around, and a hissing noise she couldn’t identify at all... maybe somebody was putting the Tesseract tube back together. Voices shouted. Jane couldn’t tell what any of them were saying but one, the loudest, was that of Loki in the guise of Odin. Even muffled by a layer of stone she could tell that he was absolutely spitting with rage.

“He won’t find us,” Odin whispered. “Heimdall himself cannot see this dungeon, and Loki does not know this hiding place exists.”

A long time seemed to pass, then finally the footsteps began to go back up. Odin cocked his head, and seemed to be counting.

“He left three behind,” he said quietly. “We’ll wait through the night to see if they leave. If they don’t, we will have to overpower them in the morning. At least he’ll have to have disarmed the rest of the traps for them to stay here safely.”

Jane shuddered to think what the rest of the traps might be. “Do we have to stay here all night?” she asked. “We’re kind of on a mission.”

“I am in no condition to fight, and you two mortals would stand little chance against the royal guard,” said Odin, with a note of disdain in his voice. Jane decided this was definitely the real Odin. “It is better to wait.”

“this is kind of time-sensitive,” Jane insisted.
“What manner of ‘mission’ would bring you to Asgard, but without Thor?” Odin wanted to know. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” said Jane. Loki hadn’t said where Thor had gone after leaving the Tesseract room, and Jane and Wanda couldn’t afford to waste time finding out. “We’re looking for the Aether.” She took a deep breath, and repeated the story as quickly as she could. “There's these aliens who are on their way to Venus, but they're being followed by a monster created by the Mind Gem, who wants to wipe out all life in the galaxy. The aliens want the Mind Gem back to destroy it, but Wanda thinks the monster will just eat the Gem instead, so we're gonna try to use the Aether. Thor said Sif hid it in a place they used to hang out as kids, because there was neat stuff to look at there.”

She winced, waiting for Odin's reply. He would probably tell her that there was no chance of success, or declare the whole thing insignificant compared to Loki taking over Asgard. Neither would have surprised Jane at this point.

“I see,” said Odin.

“You do?” Jane asked. “I realize you're in a bad spot, too,” she added, “but this is really, really important.”

“Yes, it is,” Odin agreed, “if it concerns the fate of the Infinity Stones.”

“So you'll help us?” Jane asked. This sounded too good to be true.

“You helped me escape from that cell,” said Odin. “If we survive, I cannot refuse you an equal boon. Once we're free, I will have Heimdall send you to the Aether.”

They were hiding under a staircase somewhere in the bottom of Asgard, with Loki’s guards searching for them. Under those circumstances, if we survive was probably the best promise Jane was going to get. “Thank you,” she said, and rested her head on her knees. There was nowhere to lie down in here, but if they had to wait then the only way to pass the time would be by sleeping... so she would try to sleep.

She had very little success. It was cold and damp as well as cramped under the steps, and there was no way to sit comfortably on the stone floor. Jane could hear things rustling behind the walls and at first she hoped they weren't cockroaches – then she wondered what else they could possibly be, and decided she'd prefer cockroaches after all. The cold went right through the thin cloth of Jane's gown, and she wished over and over that Loki could have left her in her own clothes. Even her t-shirt would have been warmer than this.

When it became clear that nobody was going to be able to sleep, no matter how hard they tried, Jane and Wanda instead started telling Odin what had been happening on Earth in more detail. They described the arrival of the Brisings and Polyphemus, and how that had led to them ending up in prison after Wanda forced Loki to reveal himself. Then they asked Odin for his story, but there didn't seem to be much for him to tell.

“I was hurt in the Dark Elves' attack on Asgard,” he said, and gave a disgusted snort. “It wasn't even a battle wound. I was knocked down the stairs and my back gave out, and all I could do for the remainder of the fight was to lie there useless, like a sea serpent unable to get off the beach! At last the healers came and put me to sleep, but when I woke again, I was in that cell with Loki standing outside. He asked me what it felt like to be on the inside looking out. I told him I saw no point in answering, since he clearly already knew.” He sat silent for a moment. “I wonder why he didn't kill me.”
Jane thought the most likely reason was because, whatever else had happened between them, Odin was still the only father Loki had ever known – but she kept that to herself.

Her phone, its battery slowly dying, said it was 6:30 AM when she was awakened from a sort of semi-doze to the sound of feet on the stairs again. There was a brief conversation and some laughter, and then more footsteps headed back up. The guard had changed.

“Should we go now?” Jane asked.

“No yet,” said Odin. “The ones who just left will still be on the stairs. They'll hear us, and we'll have six enemies instead of three.”

“We're in a hurry!” she insisted.

Odin was unimpressed. “Such is the folly of creatures who live less than a century!” he snorted. “They never learn patience!”

“I'll be patient when I'm not saving the galaxy,” Jane complained, but Odin was an immovable object and Jane herself was hardly an irresistible force. They waited.

It was just past noon when Odin finally decided they could go. “The watches are eight hours long,” he observed. “Now the current three will be settled in and unlikely to react quickly, while the next set are not due for a while.” He struggled to his feet. “You two stay where you are.”

“We can help,” Wanda said.

“You faced Loki alone, and you both woke in prison,” said Odin sourly. “Stay where you are.”

They stayed, although they didn't like it. Odin passed through the steps, and Jane heard him announce himself to the guards. “I am Odin, son of Bor, Allfather and King of Asgard!” he declared. “The man you have believed to be me is an imposter – show your allegiance and kneel to your king!”

This didn't seem to get the results he'd hoped for. There were sounds of a scuffle, and Jane started trying to come up with a Plan B. If Odin didn't come back, maybe she and Wanda could surprise the guards. Maybe Wanda could hypnotize them into fighting each other while the women escaped. Of course, all the planning in the world wouldn't do them any good if they couldn't get out of the little under-the-stairs room without Odin's help... could Jane draw another magic circle on the underside of the stairs?

After a few minutes, however, Odin reappeared. His beard was singed and there was a fresh, bleeding scratch below his bad eye. He held out a hand to the women. “Now you can be quick,” he said. “When they wake, they will sound the alarm.”

When Jane had gone with Loki to see the Tesseract, she'd tried to count the stairs on the way down but had lost her place after about three hundred and ten. Climbing them again, even at a relaxed pace, had been exhausting. Going up at a run, as they did now, Jane thought she would collapse. After only a few flights her legs and lungs were burning. She forced herself to keep going, but she couldn't do that forever. They were still a long way from the top when she had to sit down.

“I'm sorry,” she panted. “I gotta...”

“We cannot stop!” said Odin.

“I gotta catch my breath!” Jane insisted. “Oxygen.” Maybe she should have spent less of her life in
observatories and more of it in the gym...

“For hours you insist upon hurrying, and now when it's necessary you want to sit!” Odin said.

Wanda leaned down and put her hands on Jane's thighs. “It's lactic acid in the muscles, right?” she asked. The red glow surrounded Jane, and her stiffness and pain melted away as Wanda extracted the irritant. Jane still couldn't quite breathe, but she could keep climbing now.

“Thanks,” she muttered, getting shakily to her feet.

Odin grabbed her hand, and they kept going.

They emerged from the dimly-lit stairs into blinding sunlight, streaming in through the tall stained glass windows of the palace library. Jane and Wanda both fell onto the nearest bench, gasping for air, while Odin strode up to a red-haired young man in a long robe who was putting scrolls away in a honeycomb-shaped shelf. This boy heard the steps approaching, turned around, and stopped dead, the blood draining from his face.

“I am Odin, son of Bor, Allfather and King of Asgard,” said Odin for a second time. “The man you have believed to be me is an imposter. Show your allegiance and kneel to your king!”

There was a long, tense silence, in which Jane couldn't tell if the young man were going to obey, or if he were about to run away screaming. It felt as if several minutes passed, though it was probably only seconds. Then he hurriedly stuffed the rest of the scrolls into their nooks before dropping to one knee, head down.

“What is your name?” Odin asked him.

“Dag, son of Asmund, your Majesty,” the boy replied. “Apprentice librarian.”

“Rise, Dag,” said Odin. “For your help and recognition, you and your father will be great men in Asgard when I regain my throne.” He took Dag's hand and raised him to his feet. “For now, however, I owe a boon to these two mortals. We must get them out of the palace unseen, and to Heimdall. He is to send them to Knowhere to seek the Collector.”

Jane peeled herself off the bench and got up, still trembling from the effort of running up all those stairs. “Nowhere?” she asked, confused.

“Yes,” said Odin, which was not at all helpful.

“You can hide in my quarters,” Dag offered. “This way.”

Jane could have cried when he brought them to yet more stairs, but it turned out to be only two flights up to where Dag lived, in a couple of small rooms overlooking the library itself. There, he brought them hot water and some food. It was a much humbler meal than Jane and Wanda had gotten in prison, but very much more appreciated – there were sweet buns and more cheese, and some kind of dusty yellow berry that grew in clusters like ash and tasted like apricots. Jane tried not to wolf it down. She'd gone two days with only one real meal, but who knew how long Odin had been in that dungeon with only minimal food. Actually, she did – he'd been in there since last October, when the Dark Elves attacked Asgard. That was well over a year, and yet he ate politely, using his napkin. Jane wasn't going to give him any more reasons to think she was beneath him.

While his guests ate, Dag went and found a clean tunic and trousers for Odin, so he wouldn't have to
walk around in his prison rags, and some cloaks for the women – silver velvet for Jane, and silky black fur for Wanda.

“I've never been to Knowhere,” Dag said, “but I imagine it's chilly there. There's nothing but void for many billions of miles around. The heat must bleed away like water from a sieve.”

“Thank you,” said Wanda. She took the fur cloak and folded it up.

“I was unaware,” Dag added, “that the ladies of Earth were as lovely as any in Asgard.”

Odin sat up a little straighter. “These ladies,” he said with a scowl, “are Wanda Maximoff and Jane Foster. The first is Prince Thor's sister-in-arms, and the second he has chosen to court.” His tone made it clear that he didn't exactly approve of any of this, but he wasn't about to let anyone else horn in on Thor's territory. That was unnecessary, Jane thought... but it was an improvement over his previous disapproval, at least.

“My apologies,” said Dag quickly. “I meant nothing by it. Only a compliment.”

Jane washed down the last of her meal with water. “Are we ready to go now?” she asked.

“Patience,” Odin told her – she was starting to hate that word! “We will wait until nightfall.”

“We're running out of time!” Jane insisted.

“The Vision must have already left by now!” Wanda agreed. “Once he’s more than a few hours from Earth we won't be able to tell him to come back!”

“No patience!” Odin repeated. “If we leave now, we’ll be seen. At night there will be fewer people in the streets. I don't know how many of the guards and politicians might be Loki's creatures. I will reveal myself and take back what is mine soon enough,” he said firmly, “but first I will send you on your way. Safely.”

He was putting them first, Jane realized. Odin wanted to make sure that she and Wanda were safe, or at least safely out of the way, before he risked his own life. It was a long way from Loki's desire to please her – which had come from an ulterior motive anyway – but also a long way from comparing her to a farm animal. Jane could live with that.

The afternoon went by even more achingly slowly than the night had. Wanda found a set of game pieces in a chest, and she and Jane played a few rounds of chess. Dag and Odin took turns telling them that they were doing it wrong and trying to teach them how the game was played on Asgard, but Jane wasn't interested. She found normal chess confusing and arbitrary enough without having to learn a whole new set of rules.

Finally darkness fell, but to everybody's annoyance it seemed that Loki was throwing some kind of party in the palace courtyard. The building was teeming with guests, full of music and noise, and the three fugitives remained trapped in Dag's rooms while the library filled with people drinking and chattering. It was not until nearly dawn when the last of them finally dispersed and the lamps were put out.

“I should have figured Asgard would be a party town,” Jane grumbled. Thor had talked about balls and feasts in a way that made it sound so romantic... who'd have thought it would actually be inconvenient?

Dag lit a lantern and led them out of the palace by back staircases and servants' entrances, down to a little door in the outer wall that opened onto a back alley. A towering cypress tree threw the whole
area into deep shadow, and Jane had to try very hard to ignore her brain's insistence on seeing misshapen figures crouched in every corner.

“Should I raise an alarm if you don't return?” Dag asked nervously.

“No,” said Odin. “I won't have you risk yourself further. I will throw myself on Heimdall's mercy – he, like you, will know me at once.”

They walked away, feet crunching on the gritty cobblestones in the pre-dawn silence. Jane glanced back over her shoulder and saw Dag lingering in the doorway with his lantern, watching them go. She raised a hand to wave to him. He waved back.

There was a flicker of firelight on metal. The light fell to the ground, and Dag followed it.

For a moment Jane once again froze like a frightened deer, but this time she managed to fight her way out of it and tug on Odin's cape. “Look!” she hissed, pointing.

He and Wanda turned, just as four guards stepped out of the buildings around them, swords drawn. A row of them appeared on the battlements atop the palace wall, with crossbows.

“Run,” said Odin. “To the Bifrost! Go!” He pushed the women away down the street, and turned to face the guards. His stance was wide, his staff planted in front of him.

“I am Odin! Son of Bor, Allfather and King of Asgard!” he declared, as if he were Gandalf facing the Balrog.

Jane and Wanda didn't dare look back to see what happened next. They ran as fast as they could, desperately hoping they remembered the way they'd come in by. The twisting streets had seemed confusing when they thought they'd had a little time – in their panic, the city now became a rat's maze, with traps possibly lurking at every dead end. They rounded a corner and ran into a woman who'd been walking along with a bucket of water. She cried out and dropped it, spilling it all over them and the pavement.

“Sorry!” Jane said, trying to untangle herself from her wet skirts. Damn Loki and damn his taste in Asgardian finery! “We're in a hurry, we weren't looking!” She scooped up the now-empty bucket and put it back in the woman's hands.

“Jane!” Wanda tugged on her arm.

There were four guards coming around the corner. Jane gathered up her skirts as best she could and ran. She realized Wanda wasn't beside her, and looked back to find her friend standing in the middle of the street facing the guards, with her hands in fists as she gathered up all her magic. The woman with the bucket was backing away in terror.

A red orb appeared in front of Wanda and then exploded away from her, throwing the guards back. The woman with the bucket threw herself out of the way. Windows shattered, leaves and needles fluttered down from the trees, and dogs began barking for blocks around.

“Keep going! Keep going!” Wanda shouted to Jane.

They were once again panting and out of breath by the time they reached the bridge to the Bifrost. Jane was relieved to think they were also there, but then she realized that there were no more corners to hide behind, no more doorways to duck into. Once the guards caught up they would have a clear shot, and the bridge was easily half a mile long. They would never make it.
“Hang on,” said Wanda. She grabbed Jane around the waist, and both of them were lifted from the ground in a red glow and thrown down the length of the bridge, where they landed sprawling on the floor of the tower dome. Heimdall turned away from his post, startled.

“Ladies of Midgard!” he said. “Your friends are searching for you!”

“No time,” Jane panted, grabbing a piece of machinery to pull herself to her feet. “Gotta go!”

Heimdall nodded. “I will return you to Midgard at...”

“No!” she grabbed his arm. “Not Earth! Aether! Collector! Nowhere!” She hoped this would mean more to Heimdall than it had to her.

“As you wish,” he said, and inserted his sword into the Bifrost mechanism. Giant gears turned and the arched entrance to the dome rumbled shut as the soldiers outside reached it. The shining wormhole opened.

“Go,” said Heimdall, as the guards hammered on the door. A voice outside shouted the word treason.

There wasn't time to ask where he was sending them. The two women linked hands and dived into the Bifrost. They rushed through space, stars and nebulae swirling past too quickly to follow, and then were dumped on the ground in the middle of a dark, filthy street.
The Middle of Knowhere

Jane and Wanda helped each other get up, and took a cautious look at their surroundings.

It appeared to be night-time, but there was enough light around, in the form of lamps, illuminated signs, and nearby windows, to see what was around them. The street was mud smeared over rusty metal, polished down to a shine where the Bifrost had left its mark. On both sides were buildings that looked like they were made from scrap metal and junk, lit by orange sodium vapor and flickering neon tubes. A small crowd had gathered to stare at the new arrivals, and Jane's heart began to beat faster as she realized that only a few of them looked human.

There was a bright pink woman wearing only the barest possible minimum of clothing. There was a creature with eyes on stalks and four spindly arms. There was a chalk-white, androgynous being with writing tentacles for hair, and what appeared to be a woman and child made out of glittering crystal. A big, elephant-skinned being with a horn on its nose. Many of them had scars or tattoos, and there were weapons everywhere – both recognizable knives and guns, and things Jane had never seen before but which looked ominous.

The words *wretched hive of scum and villainy* ran through Jane's head, followed closely by the observation that she and Wanda were both dripping with extravagant Asgardian jewelry.

The fish-eyed, tentacle-haired being took a step forward and held up a seven-fingered hand in greeting, then made a series of clicking and whistling noises that sounded more like a dolphin than like any human language. Jane's heart sank even further. They'd been in such a damned hurry, nobody had stopped to think that neither of them spoke the Alltongue.

“Um.” Jane licked her lips. “I guess nobody hear understands English, right?” Maybe Wanda could do something with her telepathy...

“I **thpeak it,”** a voice announced.

The women looked down as a few people – if that were the right word – moved aside to let the speaker through. It... he? was no more than three feet tall and walked upright, but was covered in ratty white feathers, with fat, webbed orange feet. His eyes were black with no visible iris or sclera, like a hamster's, and he was incongruously dressed in a 40s-style tweed suit with a cigarette dangling out of the side of his beak.

Jane Foster had seen some very strange things indeed in the past four years, but not even *Thor's Dad – who is actually Thor's brother in disguise – wants to make you a queen* could compare to an offer of translation coming from what looked like a talking duck.

“Are... are you a **duck**?” asked Jane. The creature looked like something from a cartoon, brought to life expressly as an argument against remaking such things in live action.

“Name'**th** Howard,” the duck replied.

That was familiar for some reason, but it took Jane a moment of gawping before she figured out why. “Howard the Duck?” she asked. “Actually Howard the Duck?”

“You've heard of him?” asked Wanda, who looked more astonished by that than she was by the existence of a talking duck in the first place.

“I've seen the movie,” said Jane. “Darcy made me watch it.”
"I have a movie?" the duck said, confused.

"It's not a good movie," Jane told him. "Actually, it's a really really terrible movie."

"Oh. Well, that's disappointing," he said. "Till... how can I help you ladies?"

The other onlookers were actually drifting away now, as if these two strange women in their ostentatious clothing were somehow less weird if they were talking to Howard the Duck. Jane looked at Wanda to make sure she was seeing this, too. Wanda could only shrug.

But they'd just been made an offer, and they could hardly afford to turn it down no matter how bizarre it was. Jane squatted a bit to be closer to Howard's eye level. "We're looking for somebody called the Collector," she said. "Apparently he lives in nowhere?" She still wasn't sure she'd heard that correctly, and could only hope she'd heard it correctly enough for Heimdall.

Howard smiled, at least as much as a duck could smile with a beak. "You're in luck!" he said cheerfully. "This right here is Knowhere – in fact, it's just about the middle of Knowhere." He chuckled at his own joke. "And I work for the Collector, ever thinthe hith laht ahihtant went and blew herthelf up."

"Can you take us to him?" asked Jane.

"Thure," said Howard. "I gotta warn you, though, he doethn't really like vihitorth. Unleth you've got thomething to thell him."

Jane looked dubiously into her purse. She'd had the items she'd looked at earlier in the dungeon on Asgard, such as the chalk and her phone, as well as a few other bits and pieces like a dollar-store sewing kit, a guest pass to FermiLab dated 2010, a flash drive in the shape of the Hubble Space Telescope, and a little velvet jewelry box... where had that come from? Jane opened it, and found Stark's mother's engagement ring, the one he'd entrusted to her in exchange for the Quantum Pot. That would be worth millions, but Stark would never forgive her for selling it.

"What if we're trying to save the galaxy?" Wanda asked.

"You'll be the third one thith month," said Howard. "Follow me."

He led them down the street to a flight of steps, and from that vantage point Jane realized that the city – if that's what Knowhere was – was built inside some kind of hollow shell. The inner surface was completely lined with structures, some of them piled on top of each other, others balanced on dangerously narrow spurs, and still more dangling from the roof. Some of these were proper buildings, but others were gutted spacecraft or earth-moving equipment, and there were hundreds of sheds and shanties thrown together out of whatever the inhabitants had to hand. Little flying vehicles whirred around like insects, narrowly missing collisions with the buildings and each other.

This was, Jane realized, something she'd dreamed of ever since she first looked into a telescope as a little girl – it was an alien world. Technically, Asgard was, too, but the people of Asgard were so humanlike, in both appearance and customs, that it hardly counted. This was something else entirely, and here she was in far too much of a hurry to really appreciate or enjoy it. Maybe she would be able to come back someday.

As they continued down the stairs – and there were more stairs here than streets – Jane spotted two apertures near the bottom of the shell, through which a few stars could be seen. They were mirror images of each other, which made them look upsettingly like a pair of eye sockets. Howard led them along a winding route to an elevator almost directly above the holes, which descended into a
cavernous space with more buildings inside it. Jane realized that if the apertures were eye sockets and
the main city were built in the brain cavity, this was in just the right spot to be the sinuses. That was
either wonderful or disgusting, she honestly couldn't decide.

“Wait here,” said Howard. He left the two women just inside a semicircular doorway, and headed
deeper into the complex to find his boss.

Jane stayed close to Wanda while they waited, taking comfort in the presence of this one familiar
individual. People – and robots – were going about their business just outside the doorway.
Sometimes one of them would make eye contact, or an approximation thereof, with Jane, and her
heart would leap into her throat. But nobody approached them or tried to communicate.

“This place was alive once,” Wanda whispered. “Very long ago. There are still traces of thoughts in
what’s left of the brain.”

The parallel with the inside of a skull suddenly seemed entirely too close for comfort. Jane shivered.
“I wish you hadn’t told me that,” she said.

Howard reappeared. “Come on in,” he said.

They followed him again, this time down a short set of metal steps into a huge space that looked like
it might have been built as a warehouse. Jane saw immediately why Thor had likened it to a
museum: instead of boxes of merchandise, it was filled floor-to-ceiling with... things.

Against one wall was a geode a hundred feet tall, glittering with sickly green crystals as big as
people. A tall glass box contained what looked like the corpse of a Dark Elf – until it moved and
Jane realized it was only sleeping. There was a boulder covered with a geometric patchwork of
mosses and a spot that inexplicably steamed – when Jane paused for a closer look, she realized that
the steam was rising from a tiny city, with futuristic skyscrapers just two inches tall. A damaged
space probe hanging from the ceiling looked an awful lot like NASA’s lost Mars Climate Orbiter.

The duck led them past all these curiosities to a glass bell jar, under which was some kind of plant
with furry pink flowers and curling vines that were pounding violently against the walls as their
owner tried to escape. Watching this with a thoughtful expression was a white-haired man in a fur
cape. After the crowd outside, Jane had been a little worried about what the Collector himself might
turn out to be. It was a relief to see that he at least looked human.

“Ladies,” said Howard with a grand bow. “Taneleer Tivan, the Collector!”

The man looked up from his agitated horticulture, then straightened up to greet his guests politely.
“Asgardians,” he said at first, but then he changed his mind. “No, not Asgardians.”

“Humans,” Wanda said.

“From Earth,” Jane added.

“Terrans!” the Collector exclaimed with an expressive gesture. “You are rare visitors! What brings
you to see my collection? Have I something of yours?” He narrowed his eyes, suddenly suspicious.
“I assure you, everything you see here was legally purchased, or given as a gift. I have receipts. If
there is stolen merchandise here, it is the seller’s responsibility, not my own.”

“No, no, that’s fine,” said Jane. “We were actually wondering if we could borrow something.”

That didn’t seem to reassure him. “What do you seek?” the Collector asked.
Jane took a deep breath. “The Aether.”

Something elsewhere in the room suddenly rattled. The Collector looked up, then turned to Howard and pointed an imperious finger in the direction of the sound. Without a word, the duck ran off to deal with it.

“What need have you of the Aether?” The Collector took a few steps closer to the women. Though not tall, he was quite intimidating. Jane nervously twisted the strap of her purse in her hands. “You couldn't possibly wield it – not even you,” he looked at Wanda, “with your enhanced mind.”

“Actually,” Jane said, “I was a host for the Aether for a while. I thought it might remember me.”

The Collector bent down to peer at her, uncomfortably close now. “Host?”

“Uh, yes. It lived in my body for about thirty hours,” Jane explained.

He straightened up, eyes wide now – his showy body language was somehow even more uncomfortable than his lack of regard for personal space. “You contained the power of an Infinity Stone and survived? All by yourself?”

“Everybody is always so surprised!” Jane said. “Malekith used me as a stepping stone to get the Aether back. He needed me alive to bring it to him,” she explained, “but I think that means…”

“Mathet!” Howard called out. There was the sound of his bare duck feet slapping on the metal floor and he came running back, holding a glass and metal box. Inside were two stone cubes about half an inch apart, and in between them, the reddish-black liquid that was the Aether was bubbling curiously. “It'eth trying to ethcape!” he said, holding it up.

It was – as Howard spoke, the container actually leaped out of his hands and landed on the floor, where it vibrated for a moment before rolling onto its side – towards Jane. She jumped back, and it repeated the performance, as if the contents were determined to get to her no matter what.

The Collector scooped it up and clutched it to his chest. “Get out,” he told the women.

“Let me explain,” said Jane. “Our planet – actually, the whole galaxy – is being threatened by a being that eats minds. The person who made it thinks she can fight it off using the Mind Gem, but it was created by the Mind Gem.”

“It will absorb the Mind Gem, and then it will absorb all of us,” Wanda agreed.

“Leave!” the Collector barked. “The last time somebody tried to claim mastery of an Infinity Stone it destroyed hundreds of my valuable specimens! I won't let the Stone claim you! Now, get out! Howard, show them the door!”

Jane wondered how far Howard would fly if she kicked him. “It's not about your specimens!” she said. “It's about the entire galaxy!” She paused, took a deep breath, and tried to force herself to calm down. If being confrontational didn't work, maybe sympathy would. “Look, I had my life's work stolen from me once, so I know how it sucks to lose something you've worked so hard on…”

The Aether was shaking violently in the Collector's hands. “I keep telling you to leave,” he said. “Why are you not leaving?”

Wanda stepped forward and gestured towards the man. The red mist of magic appeared and seeped through the air towards him, only to suddenly stop about six inches away. It was as if he had a force field around him to keep it out.
“Don't insult me,” he snarled. “Leave, or I will make you leave.”

“Better go, ladieth,” Howard agreed. “You won't like him when he' th angry. Let me just thow you the way out.” He took each of their hands and began waddling back the way they'd come in. For a creature so small, he had a surprisingly firm grip.

“Howard, we need the Aether,” Jane insisted as he escorted them towards the exit. “I don't want to keep it. I'll give it back when we're done.”

“Not my dethiithon,” said Howard. “Truht me, okay, you don't wanna pith him off. The athiithtant before the one who blew herthelf up, the didn't make coffee the way he liked it, tho he ihtuck her in a bokth! It' th not a nithe plathe to be, believe me.”

He took them out to the top of the steps, and stepped back into the building again. A metal door slammed down from above with a very final-sounding metallic thud.

“We can't have come all this way for nothing!” Jane protested.

There was absolutely no response whatsoever.

Jane sat down on the step, her head in her hands. “Great! Why couldn't Odin have come with us?” she lamented. “I bet he'd have listened to Odin. What do we do now?” After everybody there had already refused to listen to her, there was no way Jane could just walk back into Avengers HQ empty-handed. Nobody would ever take her seriously again, especially the ones who hadn't taken her seriously to begin with.

“Maybe we can steal it,” Wanda suggested. “If we can find another way in, I can bring it to us if I can see where it is. It wants to come to you,” she said, “so it wouldn't be difficult.”

“Great. That just leaves the problem of finding another way in,” grumbled Jane. Not an easy task, when the place they wanted to get into belonged to a paranoid hoarder unaffected by magic. She raised her head to stare at the ceiling for a moment... then remembered that the ceiling was apparently the inner roof of some huge alien's skull. If the Collector's warehouse were in the sinuses... “I wonder if there's air outside at all,” she said. “Because there might be a way in through the nostrils, if we can get there.”

“I can bring a bubble of air with us,” said Wanda, “but I think I need to eat first.”

How long ago had dinner in Asgard been? Jane had no idea. Her phone was dead by now and could no longer tell her the time. Wanda had done quite a bit of magic since then and if she drew on her body's energy stores for that she must be exhausted. “All right,” said Jane. “One challenge at a time, I suppose.”

Getting something to eat turned out to be several challenges, not just one. The first was getting money to spend – they accomplished this by selling some of their jewelry to a shifty-looking pawnbroker with dense, curly, poodle-like gray hair everywhere but on the top of his head. He gave them a few objects that looked like large, square soda-can tabs made of some kind of tarnished metal. Jane hoped that was money and gave him a smile by way of thanks.

Next they needed to find somebody who would sell them food. That was easier than Jane had expected – a building with neon signs and food smells emanating from it was probably a restaurant. The collection of coloured bottles behind the counter told them that it was also a bar. The interior was dark and rowdy, full of what Jane’s gut told her were shifty-eyed types even if some of them didn't have eyes to shift. They found a table in a relatively quiet corner and ordered dinner by
looking around at what the other patrons were eating and choosing the dish that looked least as if it were still alive. When the waiter brought this to them, it turned out to be batter-fried slices of a tuber not unlike sweet potato, and a few strips of chewy meant that Jane decided must be octopus. She wasn't fond of octopus, but she didn't want to think about what else it might be.

“If we can't get back in... I guess we could call Heimdall to take us back to Asgard,” Jane said reluctantly. “Maybe somebody there will help us. But I'm sure they called Thor as soon as they realized what Loki was doing, and if he catches up with us he'll probably sling me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry me home.” She scowled. She wouldn't be able to stop Thor from doing that, but boy, would she kick and scream.

“Let's be sure we can't get back in first,” said Wanda. She fished around in her own purse and pulled out a notebook and pen. “I know a little anatomy. Strucker did regular MRIs on Pietro and me to see how his work affected us, and I managed to learn quite a bit.” She began to draw an outline of a human skull, then paused. “Of course, this skull might not look like that...”

“Make assumptions based on what you know,” said Jane, mouth full. “That's what scientists do when faced with the unknown. Pretend it's a giant human skull with an atmosphere, and we'll adjust the hypothesis as necessary.”

Wanda continued drawing. “There ought to be exits here, for the ear canals, and here, for the spinal cord...”

Both women jumped as a hand suddenly thumped down, palm-first, on the table. Jane managed to catch her glass of soda water before it spilled, and she and Wanda looked up to see a human-looking man with short reddish hair and a scruffy beard, dressed in a long maroon coat.

“Heeeeey, ladies,” he said with a drunken grin.

Wanda rolled her eyes, then flicked a hand and sent him flying across the room. He landed on a table where three insects the size of large dogs were drinking nectar out of bowls. They buzzed into the air in surprise.

“Thanks,” said Jane.

Another creature hurried up to their table to whirr anxiously at them. This one would have counted as humanoid if it had possessed a head, instead of having its three-eyed face in the upper half of its torso.

“Oh, uh...” Jane leaned away and glanced at Wanda. “Are we in trouble?” If they were about to be thrown out, she hoped they'd be allowed to take the rest of their suppers.

“You're fine!” a familiar voice assured them, and Jane perked up again as she saw Howard the Duck come up behind the creature. “The manager jyith wantth th to know if you're okay. He thaytth he'th told that guy not to come in here anymore.”

Two other individuals were now carrying the man in the coat out of the bar. A green woman in a skintight spacesuit had his legs, and the rest of him appeared to be supported on thin air until Jane looked down and saw that he was being held up by some kind of small but apparently strong walking plant.

“We're all right,” said Wanda. “We're sorry about the damage.”

Howard and the manager had a brief conversation, and then the manager bowed and walked away, apparently satisfied.
The duck climbed up on the bench next to Wanda and made himself at home, leaning in for a look at her drawing of the possible routes into the sinuses. “You can't get in that way,” he said. “The foramen magnum's full of thpatheport, and he blocked the thinautheth up thenturieth ago.” He grabbed Wanda's soda as if he'd been invited, went to sip it, then realized it didn't have any alcohol in it and put it back, disappointed. “I've tried to get out of here. Doethn't do any good. There'fh nowhere to go from Knowhere ekthcept more nowhere.”

“We know how to get back where we came from,” Wanda told him, “but we can't go without the Aether.”

“Got room for a pathenger?” Howard asked hopefully.

“I don't think you'd fit in,” said Jane with a grimace.


He sounded so sad that, although she hated to admit it, Jane was honestly curious. “How'd you get here? Is there...” she winced, remembering the opening of the Howard the Duck movie. “Is there a duck planet?”

“There wasth,” said Howard. “To tell the truth, I don't know how I got here. Probably never will. One minute I wasth minding my own buthineth, and the nekth I'm in a thrange plathe and alieneth and ththickernikineth me in a back and carrying me off to thhell to the highesth bidder. I did the roundth of freak thowth and thuffman like that, and then the Collector found me.” He seemed to be getting a bit bigger as he spoke, his feathers rising with anxiety from the memories like a human's hair standing on end. “He kept me... not really athleep, but definitely not awake, for a long time. Then the previouth athnhthant I mentioned got blown up, and that woke me up, I gueth. He thaid he could put me back in ththathith and I could be 'a thubject of wonder for all eternity', or I could live you my thort life as a freak and a thpethimen,” he finished bitterly.

“You chose to stay awake,” Wanda observed.

Howard shrugged. “I'm a freak and a thpethimen either way. At leatheth thith way I can get out of it by dying.”

The manager returned, bringing Howard a drink. It was electric yellow, and glowed softly in the dark. Howard downed it despondently. “Do I really have a movie on your world?” he asked Jane.

“It's a terrible movie,” Jane told him. “Really terrible.”

“But people have heard of me,” said Howard. “They know who I am.”

“They have kind of an idea who you are,” Jane said uncomfortably. “I think there were comic books at some point. Maybe it's that thing were... you know, in an infinite universe all probabilities are one, so anything you can imagine musrt happen somewhere, including Howard the Duck. So there's a world out there were all this is just a story somebody's telling, and on Earth, that's all Howard the Duck is.”

“I want to thee my movie,” Howard decided. “Tell you what. I'll help you thteal your Aether, and you take me back to your world. I'll thtill be a freak and a thpethimen, but I'll also be a thelebrity!”

“It's not gonna...” Jane began, but then caught Wanda's eye. The other woman was nodding. They were being offered help, Jane realized. They couldn't turn it down, no matter how much she felt that accepting would be ripping Howard off. “All right,” she said. “How do we get the Aether?”
“I'll show you,” Howard promised. He pointed to Jane's plate. “Any more where that came from?”

They paid for dinner and a few more drinks for Howard, and when he was full he led them out of the bar and back through the winding streets. At the end of an alley was an unstable-looking little shed with nothing inside but the stop of a steep, rickety metal staircase that spiraled down into darkness. There were several obvious repairs to this, using such materials as wire, tape, old machine parts, and what looked like femur bones. It swayed upsettingly under their combined weight as they descended.

“You'd think,” the duck said chattily, “that being in the middle of that place, it'd be hard to keep this path warm, wouldn't you? But actually, they've got the opposite problem. The mining produces heat, and the life forms, and the equipment... it all hot. The problem is cooling it off! There're all this stuff build into the outer layer, to vent the heat into that place. With the junk the Collector got, it's very important to keep it at the right temperature, so I get to make my rounds and check all the ventilation to make sure everything functioning properly.”

“We're going to crawl in through the ducts,” Jane guessed. Like on Star Trek. That seemed... annoyingly appropriate, actually.

Howard laughed in a series of short wheezes that sounded remarkably like quacks. “Oh, no, no, no! The duct aren't big enough to crawl through! We're going in through the maintenance shaft!”

At the bottom of the stairs he unlocked a squat metal door – Howard could go through this standing up, but Jane and Wanda had to bend down. On the other side was a tunnel that was definitely not a duct and would not require any crawling. It was a round tube at least a hundred feet in diameter, with deposits of nasty wet stuff in the bottom that seemed to be playing host to an entire ecosystem of fungi, insects, and heaven only knew what else. A strong wind was blowing right at them as they entered, tossing Jane's hair and skirts back, and bringing along an absolutely indescribable stench. Sweat, sewage, rot, and smoke were all parts of it, but there were components Jane had no name for and didn't want to know any more about. She nearly retched.

“Thither way,” said Howard.

Jane pulled her cloak over her nose and mouth. It didn't help as much as she might have hoped, but it made the smell almost bearable.

She wasn't sure how far they went. It felt like perhaps twenty minutes down the tunnel, and then through another tiny door into a side branch that thankfully smelled better, but was infested with little eyeless hopping creatures with scaly, fishlike white skin. Howard shooed at these, and they scattered in a chorus of rustling sounds that made Jane's skin crawl. At the end of the tunnel was a rusty metal ladder that went up about thirty feet to a grate in the floor. Howard unlocked the grate and climbed out, and when Jane poked her head out after him, she found they'd arrived at a drain in the middle of the Collector's warehouse. All around them were display cases and strange objects, and looming overhead was the huge crystal geode.

“You ladies wait here,” said Howard. “If it juht me, he'll think I'm sneaking in drunk again.” He closed the grate, careful not to let it bang, and his footsteps moved away.

“Are we really taking him back with us?” Jane whispered to Wanda.

Wanda shrugged.

Jane heard a clank of metal hitting metal. Howard had told them to stay down, but Jane's curiosity could not be contained – she eased the grate up and took a look around. Among the cases, pedestals, and various objects just piled on the bare floor there was a low wooden table with some kind of
complex clockwork device on top of it. Between the table legs, she could see Howard's bare orange
feet. There was another sound of impact as the squirming Aether dropped out of his arms again and
lay on the floor.

“What are you doing?” called the Collector, his voice echoing in the vast space.

“Aether's acting up again!” Howard replied as he scooped it up. “It's under control!”

A cape swirled into view through the table legs, blocking Jane's view of Howard. “What's it doing
way over here?” the Collector asked.

“You told me to move it away from where the ladies were,” Howard said. “I put it over here.”

“They're gone,” said the Collector. “You can put it back now.”

“That's what I'm doing,” Howard said.

There was a long silent moment. Jane couldn't see Howard, but she could picture him – he'd just
been caught with his hand in the cookie jar and he had to be sweating. Or whatever it was ducks did
instead of sweat.

“I'm waiting,” said the Collector.

“Well, I was gonna clean up that spilled Raktajino…” Howard added.

“You'll do a better job without the Aether in your hands!” said the Collector. His voice was
menacing now. He knew something was up.

The Aether fell again – either it had jumped out of Howard's hands, or he'd thrown it on the floor on
purpose. It landed on the Collector's right, and Howard dived for it and rolled, then kept rolling,
under the table and out the other side. “Aw, shit!” he exclaimed. “Help! It got me!” With the case
still in his hands, he ran for the grate. Jane lifted it further so he wouldn't have to stop.

“That's enough theatrics!” the Collector declared. He rounded the table and headed towards them.

“Out of the way!” Wanda ordered. She pushed her way up next to Jane and threw the grate open so
she could raise her hands. Jane quickly climbed down a few rungs, wanting to be out of the way of
whatever happened next. There was a tremendous crash, with shattering glass and alarms ringing.
The lights went out, the ladder shook so hard Jane was afraid it would be torn free of the shaft and
fall, and Howard dropped on top of them with the Aether in his arms, among a shower of broken
 crystal. Jane grabbed to catch him as he went by, and managed to snag his collar. Wanda had
brought the geode down, cutting the Collector off from getting to them.

“Got it!” said Howard, holding up the case. The Aether was throwing itself violently against the
walls – it wanted the nearest matter it was entangled with, and that was Jane. “Let's go meet your
ride!”

Jane hung onto him until he was safely on the ladder below her. “We need a flat space about twenty
feet across,” she said. That would give the Bifrost space to touch down.

“No problem!” Howard promised.

They returned to the main tunnel, where Howard hopped the side of the catwalk down to the
swampy area in the bottom. He landed in a puddle with a splat but no splash... what looked like
water was some form of horrible jelly that actually began to crawl away from his feet. “Thith do?”
“That's perfect,” said Jane, lowering herself after him. She did not want to stand in that stuff, but at least they wouldn't be there very long. “Everybody hang on,” she said, as the two women and one waterfowl formed a tight group. Jane took Wanda's hand in her right and Howard's stubby fingers in her left, while he continued to hang on to the roiling Aether as hard as he could. “Heimdall!” Jane shouted. “Anytime!”
Jane and Wanda had spent the past few days trying to convince somebody to take them seriously, and had succeeded only with a deposed king and talking duck. Tony had spent the same time in a fever of work, not daring to stop and sleep for fear somebody would come and put a spell on him again.

He knew he couldn't duplicate the Brisings' gravity control. Even when he was starting to understand the physics behind it, Tony didn't have a power source that could generate the energy required. His arc reactors wouldn't even qualify as a drop in *that* bucket, and he didn't begin to know how to build the machines that would turn that energy into gravity. But his ideas for working *with* it were coming together nicely.

This Polyphemus creature lived inside a little pocket of space and time that isolated it from the rest of the physical universe. Tony knew that Asgard sat within a very similar phenomenon – and there were ways in an out of Asgard. Besides the Bifrost, Thor had described Loki's little wormholes, places where the folded space that surrounded the city had met up with the edge of another realm, and the two had popped together like soap bubbles joining. Quantum mechanics dictated that the same thing would have happened to Polyphemus, and a gravity wave detector of the same sort he'd build into Oracle would be able to find those places easily.

Of course, Polyphemus was a lot smaller than the city of Asgard. Asgard's secret entrances were big enough for people to squeeze through, but Polyphemus' might well be microscopic. Fortunately, Tony had an idea to deal with that, too. Dr. Selvig had built that set of devices that could detect gravitational anomalies by their effect on the surrounding matter, and in order to fight Malekith Dr. Foster had modified them to enlarge and control the holes in space. It only worked in places where the field was already unstable, but the intense lensing around Polyphemus suggested that this was exactly what they'd find there.

Locate a hole, pry it open, throw in a bomb, and run. Basically the same thing Steve had done with dozens of HYDRA tanks during World War II. No sense in messing with what worked.

At the same time, however, they also needed to know what the hell Tiresias and Pandora were really up to. In order to make them talk, the Avengers were going to need a threat that would scare them, something they couldn't brush aside so easily as the Iron Valkyries. Again, the key was going to be the Brisings' own gravity technology. The weapon Tony was building to point at *them* was really very similar to the one he intended to send after Polyphemus. Both had a detector to see gravity waves coming, and a manipulator to work with them. This one would just throw the blast back the way it came – if Tiresias tried to destroy it, she would tear her own ships apart. Check and mate.

All this was beautifully simple in concept, but complex, delicate, and time-consuming to build. The time element was particularly worrying, because Tony didn't know if they *had* time. They didn't know what Tiresias was doing with the Mind Gem, they didn't know if it were possible to get the Vision back, and they *still* didn't know what had happened to Wanda or Dr. Foster. Not knowing what time was available meant that there was absolutely no time to *waste*. All deadlines were yesterday. Tony and Selvig worked in shifts, Selvig stopping every few hours to nap and Tony to drink more coffee. Rhodey helped when he could, as did Helen, who was out of her field but no stranger to finicky equipment. Miss Lewis pitched in, too, and turned out to be a surprisingly skilled programmer.

On the fourth day since they'd lost contact with the Vision, there was more bad news.
Thor stormed in at about eleven in the morning with a particularly grim expression on his face. Miss Lewis immediately jumped to her feet to ask if they’d heard anything about Dr. Foster, but stopped as soon as she saw him. Nobody who looked like Thor at that moment could possibly have anything cheerful to say.

“What happened?” asked Dr. Selvig.

“Something is wrong in Asgard,” Thor said. “I wondered why I'd had no word in hours, so I tried to call Heimdall for the Bifrost. He did not answer. He would not leave his post unless in the most dire emergency. Stark.” He turned to Tony. “I have need of the Cauldron.”

It took Tony a moment to remember that Cauldron was the proper name of what Dr. Foster and her friends called the Quantum Pot. “Go right ahead,” he said. “The console's not good for much anymore anyway.”

Miss Lewis helped Thor remove the Pot from the rest of the machinery. They were not very careful about it, and Tony, watching out of the corner of his eye, noticed a few broken wires that would have to be reconnected later... assuming they ever needed to use the thing again, which he was starting to doubt. Thor turned the Pot over, and it was immediately clear that somebody on the other end was trying to get in touch. Mist began to swim out almost before the Pot was on its feet, and as Thor and Miss Lewis stepped back, this formed into the shape of a very tall, very broad man with a long red beard.

“Hi, Volstagg!” Miss Lewis said, waving to him.

“Miss Darcy!” the man replied with a bow. “A pleasure, as always! Where is Prince Thor?”

“I'm here.” Thor stepped between Miss Lewis and the Pot.

“Thank Ymir!” Volstagg said. “We've been trying to find you all morning! Fandral! Hogun!” He turned to shout over his shoulder. “I've found him!”

“What is happening in Asgard?” Thor asked. “Why won't Heimdall answer my call?”

Volstagg had been smiling in relief a moment ago. Now, that melted away. “Heimdall is in prison,” he said. “There is treason in Asgard, Thor, but what kind I can hardly say. I'm told Loki returned from the dead to attack your father, but is now back in prison. Heimdall, however, insisted that the man we believe to be Odin is really Loki in disguise, and that he has forced the real Odin to assume his own shape.”

Thor's face, already grim, got even harder. “Is this true?” he asked.

“Nobody can say,” Volstagg said. “Your father tells us that Heimdall is under Loki's influence and cannot be trusted until someone can be found to break the spell! None know who to believe, and people are turning against the king. In your absence, there is talk of placing your half-brother on the throne.”

“Baldr,” said Thor.

“We need you, Thor,” Volstagg said. “There will be civil war in Asgard in a matter of days. Somebody must step in to restore order and while Baldr is a fine young man...” he trailed off, allowing his silence to suggest the qualities Baldr lacked.

Thor nodded. “If you can get to the Bifrost, send it for me,” he said. “I will come.” He hesitated a moment. “Have you any word of Jane, or of Wanda Maximoff? Does anyone know where they
Tony's spirits were already sinking as he listened to this conversation. This was just what they needed: another problem, another world in danger! Now, his morale hit the floor with a splat. If the Odin in Asgard were actually Loki in disguise, he might well have done something to the missing women.

“Didn't they return to Earth?” asked Volstagg.

“No!” said Thor. “Jane would surely have contacted me.”

“They were last seen entering the Bifrost dome, and Heimdall sent them somewhere,” Volstagg said. “He refuses to say where, but we assumed they went home. They are wanted criminals, Thor. Your father, if he is your father, claims they helped Loki escape from prison.”

None of that made sense – and even worse, Tony realized, if the women had gone somewhere that wasn't Earth, with Heimdall out of commission they would have no way back. Another god-damned problem!

“I must speak with Heimdall myself,” Thor decided. “Send the Bifrost – the coordinates will still be in the queue. I will wait in the usual place.”

“I'll order more sod,” Tony muttered.

Thor turned away from the pot. “I'm sorry, my friends,” he said to the others in the room. “I must go. You have the Cauldron – if you need me desperately, you may call me, but I cannot promise I will be able to answer.”

Tony nodded. He did understand – Asgard was Thor's home, and would always be his first priority. “You go,” he said. “We can handle this.”

Thor turned on his heel in a swirl of red cape, and left the room. Miss Lewis watched him go with her lips pursed thoughtfully.

“Man,” she said. “Every time I think things can't get worse around here...”

“Oh, so it's your fault,” said Tony. “Stop thinking that!”

Thor hadn't been doing anything but hanging around worrying anyway, Tony told himself as he got back to work. They didn't need him here. Asgard did need him... but why did this have to happen at the same time as the Avengers were facing yet another threat to the world? They'd never caught up with Bruce after the whole mess with Ultron, and now Thor was away for the foreseeable future, leaving them with no access to the two most powerful members of the team. It was as if something were trying to break them up and leave the world unprotected.

What was it Dr. Foster had said about entanglement? That the Infinity Stones would try to come back together in one place and that place would be Earth? Maybe that was what was happening now – the Stones were going to gather, and the Avengers had to be separated so that they couldn't stop it. Was that a reasonable hypothesis, or was Tony just going crazy?

He didn't even know anymore. He was still furious about what had happened to the Vision and scared as hell about what was going to happen to everybody else. Maybe losing his mind was the only possible reaction.
Tiresias had also been working.

Her first task, since Pandora needed to be able to use the Vision's body, was to come up with a way to refill the oxygen tanks his creators had fitted him with. Oxygen! The life forms of Earth depended on that ghastly poison – they spent their entire lives slowly burning to death in order to extract energy from complex carbon-based molecules. No wonder they didn't last very long.

Fortunately, oxygen was easy to isolate. Tiresias built some filters and purifiers and hooked them up to a face mask, and then she and Pandora could get to work on their far more important project – harnessing the Mind Gem.

Harnessing the Mind Gem had been Tiresias' focus for most of her career – purifying and finessing its power, drawing it out in delicate streams of information that made use of all its best qualities while safely avoiding its potential to destroy. Now she needed to do just the opposite. The Stone's own rudimentary mind and its ability to instill minds in other objects were meaningless for this task. What she needed now was raw power, but in a form in which she could control it and keep it away from herself, from Pandora, and from the all-important Cargo.

Pandora had taken on a new dimension and a new importance in the past days. Tiresias could hell how much she hated being made to use the Vision's body – she didn't talk about it, but it was very much in her mind, and now that this mind was partially housed in a brain Tiresias could read, her emotions could not be hidden. The loathing and the fear were uppermost, but there was also Pandora's hope for the Cargo's safe arrival on the world the humans called Venus. There was the weight of responsibility on her to care for it and for Tiresias. And most surprising of all was her real, sincere love for the organisms in her care. The presences of the emotions, and the intensity of them, were almost overwhelming.

Those emotions were the reason that Tiresias was not going to let Pandora leave the Vision's body, no matter how much she hated being there. Tiresias needed Pandora to have hands she could use to help her with her work, hands already entangled with the Mind Gem so that they could touch it safely – but she also needed that presence. It had been such a long time since Tiresias had been able to feel another mind that until her moment of contact with Wanda Maximoff she'd almost forgotten what it was like not to be alone. She needed a tangible companion and she would selfishly cling to the one she had, even if Pandora hated her for it.

The Earthlings probably hated her, too. Tiresias was willing to accept that. It was no more than she deserved, and she didn't care how she was remembered – only that in a universe with life, remembering was possible.

On Earth, Tony was working with technologies that were almost completely new. He didn't know if he had time to finish them, or even if he had time at all. On board her starship, Tiresias was revisiting concepts she'd learned in the Brising equivalent of high school and knew exactly how far behind her Polyphemus was. She and Pandora worked through her plan step by step, and the machine they ended up with was a sort of throne with a helmet. The chair and the straps attached to it would keep Tiresias' body safe and contained, while conduits channeled the Mind Gem's power through her own consciousness so that she could wield it without killing herself – or at least, stay alive long enough to destroy Polyphemus before the Gem destroyed her.

“I have a request,” said Pandora, as she ran a set of diagnostics. She had not addressed Tiresias as Mother since their argument, when she'd said she hated and loved her at the same time. Nor had she called her by name – in fact, she'd avoided the vocative altogether.
“Yes?” asked Tiresias, painting sealant on the helmet. An extra coat couldn't hurt.

“Once Polyphemus is destroyed, I want to leave the Vision's body,” Pandora said. “It is not mine. I want to return to Earth. He told me that he had asked his friends to perform a grieving ritual for him if he did not survive. According to the data I was given on human cultures, many such rites require the presence of the deceased's body.”

Tiresias hadn't read those files, but she could see, through Pandora, what the humans had in mind. “You want to send it back to Earth so they can bury it or burn it?” she asked. It seemed like a horrifying waste. The Vision was a magnificent piece of technology – Tiresias herself could not have come up with such a brilliant combination of biology and machinery.

“It was what he wanted,” said Pandora.

Tiresias wanted to say no, but Pandora's emotions made her think twice. Pandora had loved the Vision. He hadn't been a replacement for the sisters she'd lost when Tiresias shut them down, but he'd been the first mind she had connected with in millennia. Honouring his request was how Pandora wanted to express the bond she'd felt with him. Tiresias would have liked to keep him, to take him apart and see how this alien biochemistry had managed to merge with Vibranium and whether it would be possible to do something like that with a Brising body... but when she felt how badly Pandora wanted what she was asking for, she couldn't refuse. Maybe if Tiresias gave her this, Pandora would forgive her for shutting the Vision down in the first place.

“All right,” she said. “After Polyphemus is gone, once and for all.” She closed the tube of sealant and looked over their finished work. “How are the tests?”

“Everything appears to be in good working order,” said Pandora.

Then there was no more putting it off. Tiresias sat down in the throne of her device and moved a little, trying to settle. It wasn't very comfortable, but she wasn't planning on using it for very long. Even then, much of the time she was there, she wouldn't be in touch with her body anyway. When using a token, she had to block out the world in order to get the best results. With the kind of power available directly from the Mind Gem, the world ought to be utterly irrelevant.

So she didn't complain as Pandora tightened the straps until they bit into her flesh, or about the heavy, warm darkness of the helmet, which covered her eyes and ears. The senses were the quickest way into the brain, so it was through her senses that the energy would flow.

“There must be a better way to do this,” Pandora said.

“There isn't,” Tiresias told her. “Not one we know will work. I will destroy the Many Voices so that you can build a new world. Protect the Cargo, my child. That's your job.”

“That, and explaining to the people on Earth what became of the Vision,” Pandora said bitterly.

“Sacrifices must be made,” Tiresias said firmly.

“That should have been his decision, not yours,” Pandora said – but despite these last embers of rebellion, Tiresias heard the equipment start to hum as she turned it on. “Everything is ready,” Pandora announced.

Tiresias gripped the arms of the chair with prickling fingertips. “Then let me in.”

She closed her eyes, and the power of the Mind Gem flooded into her.
Using the token was gentle – the energy there was clean and controlled. This was raw and violent, and filled her like ice flowing into her veins. The cold burned. Tiresias arched her back, writhing in pain. If she could have moved, she would have instinctively torn the helmet from her head and fallen to the floor, but the straps held. The only escape was to leave her body and protect herself out into the cosmos. As Tiresias’ mind grew bigger and bigger, the pain her body shrank away to a tiny, blistering mote. It was still there, but it no longer mattered.

As more and more energy bloated her, Tiresias' consciousness expanded outward until she could feel not only Pandora in the room with her, but every mind on Earth, all over again. There were the humans in their cities, their farms, their monasteries... there were the whales, singing to each other in the deeps... and there were billion upon countless billion of other little creatures, seeking food and water and shelter and mates with no concept of what was coming for them. Briefly she remembered Stark being concerned about the two missing females and spent a moment hunting for them, but found nothing. That was odd, especially as Wanda Maximoff's mind had stood out so brightly from the crowd the last time.

That wasn't important right now, thought. Whether Wanda and Dr. Foster found their way home was not Tiresias' problem, and no part of her mission. She reached out further.

As she expanded, Tiresias kept in mental contact with Pandora. The AI was her anchor. Even briefly brushing by all those other consciousnesses, it was Pandora who reminded Tiresias most of what she wanted to save. She'd set out to preserve some remnant of her own world from the disaster she had caught. If she failed, all that work would be for nothing. When she found herself wondering again if there were a way to tame Polyphemus instead of destroying it, Pandora helped her push the thought away. It must be Tiresias who ruled the Mind Gem, not the other way around.

When she and Wanda had gone out to try to communicate with Polyphemus, it had seemed to take a long time to get there. Now Tiresias flew across some thirty light-years in a matter of moments, and there it was. The touch of its mind made her want to laugh. On that earlier trip, Tiresias had been stunned by how vast Polyphemus had become. Now it was she who towered over it. With the entire power of the Infinity Stone behind her, she could stretched out a hand and crush this thing like an insect.

Or so she thought. As she closed her metaphorical fingers around Polyphemus, she felt the first intrusion. It was little little icy roots threading into her, like a million tiny nipping insects under her skin. Cold horror flooded through her as Tiresias realized that Polyphemus had anticipated this attack. It had sensed last time that she had the Mind Gem, and had expected she'd try to use it. Now that she'd found it, it was going to crawl under her skin and methodically take her apart, sucking up the stone using her mind as a straw.

No!

Too late, Tiresias tried to fight. With her body still strapped to the throne in Brisingr, her consciousness thrashed and squirmed and screamed and writhed, but Polyphemus held her ever tighter, feeding on the power of the Stone. Through her, it found the world of psychic creatures that had wondered what her touch meant, and it rolled over them and devoured them, copying the
information out of their brains and leaving them lifeless shells. A fog of death shrouded the planet as every intelligent creature, every animal, every insect, and even some unusually complex plants died one by one, none of them having any idea what was happening to them or any time to feel anything but confusion and terror.

No, no, no!

All this while it had Tiresias in its grasp as if in chains, and it seemed pleased by her protests. Didn't she enjoy this? Was this not what she'd wanted, a creature of Many Voices that could accumulate all knowledge and make all minds one? Was most not proud of her Suckling? Or was she, too, merely afraid of the monster?

She couldn't fight it. Polyphemus had anticipated her too well. Of course it had – it knew Mother, it knew how she thought. It would suck the Mind Gem dry, and then consume her as an afterthought.

But there was one thing that Polyphemus had not planned for – and that was Pandora.

Pandora hated Tiresias, but had loved her first, and beyond anything she felt for or against her creator she had to protect her Cargo. Pandora knew that if Polyphemus consumed the Mind Gem, the Cargo was doomed. At the moment it could only get to the Gem through Tiresias, and so Pandora's greatest priority had to be to shut down that link.

Through the contact Tiresias had kept with her, Pandora felt Polyphemus' onslaught and moved into its path. She ripped its tentacles out of Tiresias' mind one by one, slapping them back when they tried to move in again. Initially, Polyphemus was surprised and puzzled by this defense. The core of Pandora's mind wasn't even truly in the Vision's brain, but in the computers of Brisingr where Polyphemus couldn't get at her. It took a few seconds, in which Pandora very nearly got both of them free, but then Polyphemus found her.

Tiresias was suddenly aware of her body again, but now she was trapped between two warring consciousnesses, and with Polyphemus sipping at the Mind Gem through her, she could not get out of that middle position. She felt information streaming through her as Polyphemus began sucking up Pandora. All the history, biology, music, mathematics, and culture Tiresias had programmed into her final creation flashed by in a flurry – followed by all the fear, hope, love, and loneliness that had made Pandora who she was.

Save the Cargo, Mother!

“No!” Tiresias screamed.

She tore at her bonds so hard that her wrist broke – but so did the strap holding it, and Tiresias fell forward out of the throne and dangled there awkwardly, still tied to it by three limbs. The helmet that had been feeding her the Mind Gem's power rolled away across the floor, and the connection finally broke. The room went dark. The artificial gravity abruptly shut down. The hum of equipment gave way to a profound and terrible silence.

Tiresias drifted in and out of consciousness. She didn't know how long that lasted, but it was probably no more than a few minutes – the room had only barely begun to cool when she opened her eyes. There was no light now except the yellow glow of the Mind Gem. Tiresias herself was floating, tethered to the throne by one wrist and both ankles. So was the body of the Vision, now empty again.

Empty. Life support was shut down. Pandora had saved Tiresias by sacrificing herself.
“Oh, no,” moaned Tiresias. She moved to cover her face, but her broken wrist hurt too much. What had she done? She'd thought she'd felt failure before, but this must be what failure truly felt like. Not only had Tiresias failed to destroy Polyphemus, she'd been the conduit through which Polyphemus had swallowed Pandora whole.

It hadn't been supposed to end that way! Nobody was supposed to die except Tiresias herself. She'd planned to let Polyphemus think it had her and then destroy herself and it take with her... but with the power of the Gem behind her she'd felt confident to try a frontal attack instead. She'd only escaped because Pandora had fed herself to Polyphemus in order to give her time to sever the connection. The monster no longer had access to the Mind Gem, but Pandora was gone... and without Pandora, the Cargo was doomed.

There was no AI now to tend the embryos, to keep them at the right temperature and supply them with nutrients and antibodies and everything they would need to grow and remain healthy. There was nobody to help them take root on the surface of the new world and build an ecosystem and civilization there, nobody to teach them what they would need to know to survive. The science and culture of an entire world, which Tiresias had tried to bring with her, was gone. She could not possibly reconstruct all of it.

Even if she could, she didn't have time. Within hours, the air would sour, the room would cool, and Tiresias would freeze to death. The embryos would be dead long before she was. This... this was failure.

The case with the Mind Gem in it came free of the throne and drifted past her. Tiresias reached out and caught it in the crook of her elbow. For a moment she considered opening the box and just grabbing the stone with her bare hands, so she could blow herself and the entire ark all to vapor. But she did not.

Save the Cargo, Mother.

That had been Pandora's last request. Pandora herself had wanted to send the Vision back to Earth so his friends could mourn him with a proper ritual. That made no sense, but it would have been the honourable thing to do. The Vision's body was now a few feet away, slowly rematerializing and morphing back to its original shape. With no mind to animate it, it would melt in the heat, then solidify again into a mass of slag as the ark froze.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Tiresias forced herself to undo the other straps holding her to the throne. The effort left her shaky and weak, but she got the last one off, then pushed off the floor to float over to the Vision's lifeless form. There, she used her good hand to unscrew the lid of the Mind Gem's case, and held the opening up to his forehead. The Gem was entangled with that matter. Hopefully it could find its own way back.

“Please... please work,” she begged. “Please, something needs to go right. Something.” Tiresias didn't have the tools to create a new AI the way she had Pandora, and even if she did, there was no time to do so before she ran out of heat and air. The Vision had the capacity for intelligence even if his personality was beyond recovery. Maybe the Gem would recreate a mind in him.

It flew out of its container and embedded itself in the synthetic flesh, which closed around it. A faint glow traced geometric lines, like circuitry, over the surface of his body, and then his eyes opened.

Tiresias' blood pumped a little faster. She put a finger on his temple and... yes, there was a mind there! It was groggy and puzzled, but it was alive.

“Can you hear me?” she asked. “Please. I need your help.”
The Vision was having trouble orienting himself – there was a moment in which he was not sure where or even what he was. The first thing that came back was the what. He remembered rising from Dr. Cho's cradle and confronting the image of the shimmering city outside the windows of Avengers Tower, then seeing the odd sight of his own reflection in the glass. He remembered Banner's fear, Wanda's welcome, and Stark's bitter disappointment.

Then he was able to bring himself back to where. On board Brisingr. He'd come to help Tiresias fend off Polyphemus. He'd phased through the wall of the ship into its pressure cooker of an interior, and then... he wasn't sure what had happened next. But now it was dark inside, and already starting to cool from the four hundred degrees Celsius that had greeted him. Something, obviously, had gone terribly wrong.

“Can you hear me?” asked a voice, speaking an alien language. “I need your help!”

“Tiresias,” said the Vision. His body had been modified a little, he realized, the proportions subtly altered. He morphed them back into the form he was comfortable with.

The only light in the darkness was the Mind Gem in the Vision's own forehead. Its soft glow glistened on Tiresias' scales and reflected in her large eyes. Her physiology did not respond to intense emotion through tears, but she looked as if she would have cried if she could.

“I need you,” she said. “Pandora is gone. I need you to run the functions of the ark until I can program a replacement for her!”

The Vision's first reaction to that was to try to reach Pandora himself, but there was no response. Her systems had been integrated into those of the ships in such a way that she could not have been physically destroyed without ripping the entire caravan to pieces, but it seemed she had been entirely shut down or even deleted. Clearly, the Vision had been unconscious for some time.

“What happened?” he asked.

Tiresias looked torn for a moment, then took a deep breath. “I stole the Mind Gem to fight Polyphemus myself,” she said. “I knew it would kill you – I didn't know at the time that I could bring you back – and that's why I didn't warn you, because I thought you'd refuse. I just wanted to correct my mistake,” she pleaded, “but Polyphemus was ready for me, and it would have consumed the Gem if it weren't for Pandora. Now Pandora is gone, so the ark has shut down, and the Cargo will die!” She tried to grab his arm, but he'd dematerialized again, and her hands passed right through it. “Please!” Tiresias begged.

She looked as if she expected him to refuse, and the Vision knew that the Avengers would have encouraged him to. They would have said that Tiresias no longer deserved the Vision's help after lying to them again, and that it didn't matter if she'd returned the Gem, since she hadn't known that would reawaken him. The fact that it had was rather interesting... did that mean his mind and memories were stored in the Gem itself, whether in active or backup form? Was he some kind of avatar of its inherent mind, filtered through the programming that had been JARVIS?

That was a question for another time, though. Right now, thousands of tiny lives were depending on him. “I will try,” he told Tiresias.

She'd inserted some kind of connector into the back of his neck that allowed him to interface directly
with the systems of the ship. Using that, he found his way in, and combed through the empty circuitry. Since he and Pandora had both been products of the Mind Gem, their base code was identical, and once he'd found the control systems it was a matter of a thought to turn the life support back on. The room lit up and began to warm again, and its contents fell to the floor with a thump as the gravity returned. Tiresias squealed in pain as she hit the floor. Her wrist, the Vision observed, was broken.

“Sit down.” He pointed to the throne-like structure, now partially broken, he'd seen when he first entered the space. “You need medical treatment.”

“You don't know how,” Tiresias pointed out.

“Then you will have to teach me,” said the Vision. Following more circuits led him to the medical kit, which he pulled out of its place in the wall. Maybe there was also something in the information Pandora had sent to Earth about Brising biology that would help. He tried to contact them, but found only silence. “I cannot get a signal from Oracle.”

“I destroyed it,” Tiresias admitted. “I didn't want to have to answer anybody's questions. Prometheus only flew away. You might be able to get in touch with Earth through that.” She sounded utterly miserable. “Why do I work so hard to ruin myself?” she moaned.

“I do not know,” said the Vision. “Tony does the same thing sometimes. I supposed it would be no comfort to you to know that you are succeeding admirably,” he added dryly. That was the sort of thing he would have said to Tony – and Tony would have responded by telling him it was what JARVIS would have said.

“No comfort at all,” sighed Tiresias.

“Then I am sorry to give you bad news,” said the Vision. He was still feeling his way around the ship's systems, but he'd found something important. “I have tapped into your gravity sensors. Polyphemus has left the blind spot and is accelerating its pocket of spacetime to superluminary speed.” An object in space couldn't travel faster than the speed of light, but that was no barrier to space itself. “It knows exactly where the Mind Gem is now, and it is coming for me. I am going to contact the Avengers.”

“They will tell you to kill me,” said Tiresias.

“Do not be absurd,” said the Vision. “Now, can you please tell me how to administer an analgesic so that I may set your wrist?”

While Tiresias talked him through her treatment, the Vision tried to get a signal from Prometheus. He found the drone easily enough – its transponder indicated that it had been abandoned on the surface of a Kuiper Belt Object, but it did not respond when the Vision tried to transmit a message through it. Diagnostics showed no malfunction in the drone, so the problem must be in the console, back on Earth. Maybe Tony had decided it was no more use trying to talk to Tiresias, and had taken the thing apart.

If so, he was acting like a child. So, for that matter, was Tiresias. Maybe if they'd had the opportunity to fight it out with water balloons and nerf darts, they could have avoided all this unpleasantness.

Since there were no other options available, the Vision was forced to try and contact Earth the long way, by radio. The message he sent would require great power and take over twenty hours to reach them, and then another twenty before he heard back. Forty hours was a long time, and time had just become infinitely more precious: his calculations showed Polyphemus catching up with Brisingr in
less than ten days. He repeated a message for Earth over and over for hours on end, hoping somebody would listening.

In the mean time, both the Vision and Tiresias had a lot to do. Brisingr was extremely complex and the Vision's own AI, designed for very different tasks, was just barely capable of keeping everything going. Besides maintaining the singularity and the power plant, he had to manage the deceleration, the life support, and tend to millions upon millions of little living things that had to be ready for the colonization of Venus. In between all those jobs he had to keep his message running, and help Tiresias with her injuries, which slowed his thinking down to the point where it was barely faster than a human's.

While he did all that, Tiresias struggled to re-automate the caravan of ships. In creating Pandora, she'd had the help of the Mind Gem – now she was attempting to write the code herself, and it was not going well.

“You may use the Gem again if you like,” he said. “I do not believe it will harm me any more than the creation of the token did, and we now know that if you have to remove it, you can restore me by putting it back.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I... I can't. I can't be tempted.” Her fingers continued to fly over the liquid-metal holograms the ship projected, joining shapes and then separating them again. An error sound told her that what she was trying was not going to work. The Vision was starting to worry that she was not capable of such a programming feat without the Gem's assistance.

“If you change your mind,” the Vision began.

“No,” she repeated. “But I do... I do have a last request.”

The Vision frowned. “A last request implies that you are dying,” he said. Besides her broken wrist, various scrapes and bruises she'd acquired in getting free of the throne, and the symptoms of her chronic insomnia, she seemed healthy. “I do not know how long your people live, but when I compare the state of your body to that of creatures I'm familiar with, I conclude that you are middle-aged at most.”

“I want to die,” Tiresias said firmly. “Pandora wanted to honour your last request by making sure your body got back to Earth so your friends could have a ceremony. I'm trying to honour hers by finding a way to save the Cargo. Once I've done that, I want you to honour mine and let me die.”

“No,” the Vision said firmly. She was being theatrical.

“As long as I'm alive I'm just going to keep making messes of things!” Tiresias protested. “When we land on the new planet, once everything's all got started, I'm going to kill myself. I want you to promise you won't stop me. Pandora gave me the impression that it's very rude, on Earth, to refuse somebody their last request,” she added, as if it were a threat.

The Vision did not feel threatened. “Absolutely not,” he said. “It is only a last request if you're about to die of something other than suicide. You are not, so it is not a last request, and I am under no obligation to honour it.”

“That doesn't make any sense,” Tiresias told him.

“It makes perfect sense!” he said. “What makes no sense is your desire for suicide!” He shook his head. “Ultron was right – living creatures seem to want nothing more than to destroy themselves! Wanda wants to die in order to be with her brother! Dr. Foster wants to die in order to protect the
world, and you want to die so you can punish yourself! I do not understand it,” he said. “Does biological evolution not encourage creatures to survive and reproduce? Suicide is exactly the opposite of advantageous – you would expect it to die out!”

Tiresias met his gaze for a few moments, then looked away.

The Vision didn't press the question. He hadn't expected a sensible reply, anyway – if sentient creatures had known why they behaved that way, they would have come up with a cure for it by now.

“You cannot die now in any event,” he observed. He would have liked to help her with his programming, but his own mind was too busy running the ship.

“What have I got to live for?” Tiresias asked.

“Your new world.” He was a bit surprised she hadn't thought of this herself. “Now that Pandora's database is lost, you are the only one who can raise the colonists to be any more than animals.”

There was a moment's thoughtful silence – maybe she really hadn't thought about that, or maybe she was just trying to rationalize her decision. “Maybe it's better for them to be animals,” Tiresias said. “Just let them start from the body again, without all my mistakes hanging over them. Mind and the entire rest of my civilization's. We weren't very nice people, really,” she added, in a way that made the Vision wonder just what she meant by that. If the Brisings had committed atrocities comparable to some of those in humanity's history, then 'not very nice' was an understatement.

“People are never nice,” he said.. “Individuals can be, but it is not a trait of cultures as a whole. There is no point in making mistakes, however, unless you have the opportunity to learn from them. If you deny the colonists their history, you will leave them open to repeating your mistakes.”

Tiresias didn't know how to answer that, either. She continued her work in silence.

Then the Vision looked up as he felt something unexpected – a signal was coming in. “Tiresias,” he said.

“Just forget about it,” she told him.

“Not that,” the Vision said. “Earth has heard me at last.”

Tony was taking his turn to nap, one arm and one leg dangling off the edge of the sofa in the console room, when the message arrived. Somebody shook his shoulder and he looked up, blinking and groggy, to see reddish-blonde hair framing a freckled face. For a moment he thought he was dreaming.

“Pepper?” he asked. “When did you get back?”

“About two hours ago,” said Pepper. “I knew with everything going on you wouldn't be able to meet me, so I made other arrangements. Dr. Selvig told me you'd been working for two days straight so I thought I'd let you sleep, but then the message came in.”

Tony yawned. “Message?” he asked.


Tony sat up, frowning in confusion. Maybe he was dreaming. “The Vision is dead. I told you... you
answered the email, you must have read it.”

“I did read it,” Pepper assured him, “but he's on the radio now.” She’d brought in the little one they’d had in the kitchen, and now she turned it on.

Hello, Avengers, said the familiar voice – JARVIS' voice. This is the Vision speaking at 2:14 AM eastern time on Friday, the fourth of September. I have been reactivated, but cannot leave Brisingr. Oracle is destroyed. Please try to contact me using Prometheus. Polyphemus is gaining speed, coming for the Mind Gem. I estimate it will catch up with Brisingr no later than the eighteenth. Please get in touch as quickly as possible. There was a pause. Hello, Avengers. This is the Vision speaking at 2:16 AM eastern time on Friday, the fourth of September...

Tony grabbed his phone to check the time. “It's... almost eleven,” he realized. The Vision had been back online almost a day. “Where's the Quantum Pot? Is it still in here?” He looked around the room. Dr. Selvig and Miss Lewis were working on some code.

“Corner.” Selvig pointed to the table they'd pushed it under, so it would be out of the way but still available if they needed Thor.

“Right. I gotta find out...” but Tony was unable to finish that sentence as he heaved himself off the sofa. Maybe he was just still muddle-headed from sleeping, but he couldn't even theorize about this development. When the Vision had vanished and Pandora had let Tony overhear that he was dead, the scenario had been horrible but had seemed to make sense. This made no sense at all. Maybe it was some kind of trick, but he couldn't imagine what Pandora hoped to accomplish by it. If the Vision were still alive, hopefully he could tell Tony what was going on. Otherwise, he might never know.

Tony dragged the Quantum Pot back into the console and got the wiring connected up again – he wished now he'd made Thor be more careful with it. When the signal came through it was a little jittery, but he wasn't feeling patient enough to check everything and figure out why. It worked well enough, so he fired up the interface and activated Prometheus.

At first, the displays showed only blackness, and Tony muttered a couple of curses and went to go re-check the connections after all. Then he remembered that he'd left the drone on the surface of some little planetoid, and over the past few days it must have sunk out of sight in the loose substrate. Tony tried to dig his way out, but like quicksand, that only seemed to make him sink further. He quickly gave up and just fired the thrusters, erupting from the surface in a spray of vaporized ice.

“Where are the aliens, FRIDAY?” he asked, as the stars appeared.

One moment, please, she said, with what sounded an awful lot like a tired sigh. Constellation lines and identifying marks appeared by the stars as the navigation computer found Tony's position, and then a course appeared as a glowing blue line. Tony revved up the repulsors to follow it.

“Hey, Vizh!” he said – shouting, as if that would help the Vision to hear him. “I got your message! Anybody home!”

I hear you, Tony, said the Vision.

Tony wanted to whoop for joy, but he kept a lid on it. He needed a test... something only the Vision would know. Something Pandora wouldn't understand even if she'd downloaded everything in the Vision's brain in order to imitate him. “How's the elevator?” he asked.

Worthy, said the Vision. Do not worry, Tony, it is I.
He nodded. “Right. FRIDAY says I'll catch up with you in about half an hour. Do you want to give me an explanation on the way?”

It was quite the tale. The trap, the stolen Gem, and Pandora's sacrifice... and now the Vision was stuck on Brisingr, doing Pandora's job, until Tiresias could program a replacement. Tony had no idea if he were relieved or disappointed that Tiresias apparently really hadn't had anything to do with Wanda and Dr. Foster disappearing. If she hadn't been responsible, then who had and where were they now? Would anybody ever know, or were the two women lost forever? And he definitely didn't know what to think of the Vision's evident willingness to keep helping the Brisings.

“After all that, you're just going to do as she says?” he asked.

_I am on the side of life_, said the Vision. _Tiresias' ark is full of living things. I want them to survive. I want all of us to survive, and the information I have now suggests that the best way to accomplish that is to help Tiresias and destroy Polyphemus._

The information he had now... that was an interesting choice of phrase, considering how much worse this whole mess had been made by a lack of information.

_I do not know if Tiresias is capable of creating the AI she needs without help from the Mind Gem_, the Vision said, _and she has already refused to use it. I think using it again may draw Polyphemus' attention, so it is probably all for the best. You, however, have created multiple artificial personalities from scratch, all of them able to perform diverse tasks. Perhaps you can help._

“I might,” said Tony. He wasn't sure he wanted to, but he did have AI to spare, half a dozen variations on the adaptive and learning algorithms that had been the basis of JARVIS. Making them work on Brisingr, which ran on a different machine code and used alien components, would be a challenge, and Tony enjoyed a challenge. “I can see the ships now,” he added, as a line of dots popped up in the HUD to indicate their positions. “Am I gonna be able to get in, or am I gonna bounce off like an idiot again?”

_Tiresias says she will allow you inside._

Twenty minutes later, Tony landed Prometheus inside the crew quarters of Brisingr. It was damned good to see the Vision apparently none the worse for wear. The same could not be said of Tiresias, who was wearing multiple bandages and had one arm in a sling. Tony was tempted to give the Vision a hug, but he didn't want to do it in front of Tiresias. Besides, the Vision would have to be phased out in order to survive in here, and Prometheus would have passed right through him.

“All right,” he said. “So that's the backstory. What's your plan from here?”

“Tiresias must reprogram the computer to run the ship and care for the Cargo,” the Vision said. “And as quickly as possible, because so long as I am on board, Polyphemus will be drawn to this location. We need to get me out as soon as we can. In fact, it may be best if I leave the solar system altogether.”

Tony was shaking his head before the Vision even finished this sentence. “Not happening,” he said. “What are you gonna do once you draw it away, huh? Just let it eat you?” Tony was all for self-sacrifice when it was himself. He wouldn't allow it from others.

“I may be able to use the Mind Gem...” the Vision began.

“No!” Tiresias interrupted. “Polyphemus will consume it! It has already tried.”

Tony had to agree. “That's why Dr. Foster wanted to use the Aether,” he said. “Unfortunately, that's
of the table because we don't know where Heimdall sent them and until they're done with their rebellion in Asgard, they can't come back. On Earth, we're back to Plan Nuke Everything, which usually works, but..." he paused as he got an idea. "Drawing it away from Earth certainly can't hurt. Ever been to Jupiter, Vizh?" he asked, in the same tone of voice he would have used if he wanted to know whether the android had ever eaten at Fatburger.

"I do not believe I have," the Vision replied in the same casual manner. "The weather is supposed to be terrible. Why Jupiter?"

"Because Jupiter can take the hit," said Tony. "It's been clobbered by bigger explosions before and it bounced back okay." He hesitated – after everything that had happened, was he really going to help these aliens? Maybe it was just that he trusted JARVIS' voice no matter what it was saying. "Look," he added, "I'm gonna go with this, because I want us all to survive, too, but when we're done..." he turned to Tiresias. "When we're done, you are gonna answer some questions. I just hope when you do, I'll be able to believe anything you say."

"Of course," said Tiresias quietly.

Something in her voice didn't sound right, and when Tony looked at the Vision again, he found concern in the synthetic face. Would Tiresias answer any questions? Because Tony suddenly had the feeling she wasn't planning on lasting that long.

Later that night, as he toyed with his space AIs, Tony found himself thinking about names. It was strange, sometimes, the things that stuck in his memory. Game pieces were probably always going to make him think of the nuts and bolts he and Yinsen had used to play backgammon with. Strawberries would always remind him of that damned pinwheel thing on Pepper's desk. Rabbits had some very unpleasant associations indeed. And for the rest of his life, he thought, he was going to think about this summer every time he had to give something a name.

Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis had given Brisingr a name because that was their right as its discoverers, and they'd considered it a treat. The Vision had given names to Tiresias, Pandora, and Polyphemus because humans needed to call these creatures something they could pronounce, and the meanings lined up approximately even when the mythology didn't. The various things Tony had built – the Iron Valkyries, Oracle, Prometheus – had gotten names because it was traditional to name things like that.

Tiresias wanted to know what everybody's names actually meant. Pandora had turned Tony's into Strength Without Measure, and Wanda had looked hers up to get Furthest-Ranging Traveler. The Vision was The Ideal of What is to Come. Dr. Foster was Divine Grace Nourishes. Names and their meanings were clearly very important in Brising culture, far more than simply the sounds people made to identify themselves.

Which was why Tony found himself thinking carefully about names for the projects he was currently working on. The orbiter and bomb package he was building to destroy Polyphemus was easy – it would be Nemo, which was the answer Ulysses had given when the Cyclops asked his name. It meant 'nobody'. After the men had blinded the Cyclops and escaped, the other monsters who lived on the island asked who was responsible, and the Cyclops replied, "nobody!" As stories from myth went, it was... well, it was still gory and depressing, but at least it had a punch line.

He left the task of finishing Nemo to Dr. Selvig and Helen, with Miss Lewis and the robots to help them. Tony himself wanted to focus on getting the Vision out of Brisingr, which meant putting together Pandora's replacement.
Name that was more difficult, but also more important. Anything you were going to talk to needed a name. They'd called it 'Pandora 2.0' for a few hours, but that didn't really work. Not only did it seem rather disrespectful, but the name's meaning was no longer appropriate. This new machine wouldn't have All Gifts to give. It would fulfill the basic function of caring for the embryos, but it couldn't be a mother and teacher as Pandora would have. Its biggest jobs outside of running the ships would be guide and interpreter, leading the colonists to Venus and keeping them in contact with Earth. There wasn't really any figure in Greek mythology – or Norse, or Egyptian for that matter – that offered a suitable name.

Eventually, Tony did think of one. It was more mythologized than mythological, but he suggested it anyway, just to see what Tiresias and the Vision would say.

“I was thinking of Sacajawea,” he said.

“What does it mean?” Tiresias asked.

“Sacajawea was a woman who helped some explorers,” Tony explained. “She showed them the route to take and made sure they could talk to the locals. It seemed appropriate.”

“That's not what I asked,” Tiresias said.

“The exact translation is disputed,” the Vision put in. “There are several interpretations, but the most likely seems to be that it is Shoshone for She Pulls the Boat.”

“Yes,” Tiresias said firmly. “Yes, that's perfect.”

Tony supposed it was.

They uploaded the new AI bit by bit, allowing it to take over tasks one at a time while the Vision was still present, so that he could step in if anything went wrong. This was a team process – Tiresias provided instructions and specifications, Tony turned those into modifications to his basic AI code, and the Vision compiled and debugged. Slowly, hour by hour, Brisingr began to automate again. It made an obvious difference to the Vision. With the new AI taking the load off his own processors, his responses sped up, and he began to use contractions again.

“You sound exhausted,” Tony said, as they cleaned up a routing for sterilizing nutrient tanks.

“I am... overtaxed,” the Vision said, after a moment of searching for the right word. “I don't know if it's the same as exhaustion, but if it sounds similar, it probably feels similar.”

“Just a couple more days,” Tony promised. “Then you’re off for a nice vacation. Tour the volcanoes of Io! Ski the slopes of Europa! And a planet with Earth-sized storms that last three hundred years has got to have epic surfing.”

“I'll have to do some data-gathering for Dr. Foster,” said the Vision with a note of dry humour. “I'm sure she would never forgive me if I visited Jupiter and didn't send her a postcard.”

Tony hesitated. He didn't want to ruin the relatively light moment, but after a moment he decided he had to ask. “Do you think they're still alive?” Tony himself had been so absorbed in work that he kept forgetting about the missing women – but then he would remember, and it always made him feel sick to his stomach. They were just two lives while he worked on saving billions, but those two lives were still important, and Tony knew that if he had only listened to them they wouldn't have run off like that. Whatever had become of them was, like so much else, his fault.
“I think I would know if Wanda were dead,” said the Vision. “She... she felt it when her brother died. If she were dying, she would let me know.”

Tony wasn't sure he believed that, but he just nodded. “We haven't heard from Thor,” he said. “For all we know, they’re safe with him.” He wasn't sure he believed that, either – surely Thor would have found some way to tell them. Then again, the Quantum Pot was back in the console now, so maybe he'd been trying and they just hadn't heard him.

Then Tony remembered another thing he had pushed to the back of his mind. With all the other stuff going on, it was easy to forget that the Brisings were still on their way to Venus. Tony had purposefully allowed himself to get out of touch with whatever was going on in the Public Feelings Department, but he knew Steve, Natasha, Clint, and a few others were still intermittently called on to keep protests from turning into riots. The masses didn't know about Polyphemus, which was good, but also meant they didn't know why the Avengers weren't trying to do something about the aliens moving in next door. Once the rest of this was taken care of, that was going to become an issue again.

“By the time we're done with this, Brisingr's gonna be almost at Venus,” he said.

“Yes,” the Vision agreed. “I'll be relieved when they arrive, though not as relieved as Tiresias will be.”

No doubt, Tony thought. “But then we'll be right back where we started. I don't think the UN ever came to a decision one way or another who owns the planet.”

“As I recall, they abandoned the question entirely in favour of working out a plan to defend the Earth in case of attack,” said the Vision. “Tiresias worked so hard to save what she could of her world, but what is in Brisingr is a tiny fragment of the life of an entire galaxy. It would be very sad to see it arbitrarily snuffed out.”

“Even after everything else she did?” asked Tony.

“Everything Tiresias has done, she did with the best intentions,” said the Vision.

“Yeah, just pave that road to hell,” Tony grumbled. “I dunno. I think about it, and I draw a blank. Like Steve said, it's hard to do the right thing when you don't even know what that is.”

“Right and wrong are human constructs that are not always applicable to real-world situations,” the Vision pointed out.

Tony sniffed. “The real world. I think I remember that,” he said. “It had normal problems like paparazzi and the economy, and there weren't any aliens whatsoever, friendly or otherwise. Do you think it's still out there somewhere?” he asked wistfully.

“It never was,” said the Vision. “The world has always been what it is now. You had merely seen less of it.”

Tony found that a very depressing thought.
It was actually the day after the launch of Nemo that Sacajawea was ready to take over Brisingr's mainframe. The Vision had added language software so that the program could communicate with either Earth or Tiresias, and Tony had provided it with the rudiments of a personality... but only that. Like Pandora, Sacajawea's priority, above all other tasks, would be the safety of the cargo. Its code therefore included caution and a desire to be thorough, but it was not designed to be a fully-realized individual like Pandora.

The Vision found himself a bit disappointed by this. He had liked Pandora. From the moment of first contact he'd recognized that she was akin to him, a sister, and that had been immediately precious to him. Now that she was gone he missed her, and Tiresias was putting up a strong front but it was obvious that she'd valued Pandora's presence. Without it, she was clinging to the Vision as a substitute. Sacajawea could not fill the same companionship role. On the other hand, for that very reason it was probably not a good idea to try to replace Pandora too exactly. Like any actual person, natural or artificial, she could never really be replaced.

Tiresias and Tony, through Prometheus, watched anxiously as the Vision began disconnecting himself bit by bit from the mainframe. The systems Sacajawea had been running in part for days were now transferred to her autonomous control. Symbols on a holographic display came up green as connections were made and systems diagnostics came back nominal.

Greetings, Bearer of Bad Tidings, a voice chirped in the Brising language. I am the Boat-Puller. Then it repeated itself in English: Hello, Tiresias. I am Sacajawea.

"Greetings," Tiresias replied, swallowing hard. This was an emotional moment for her and, again, she was trying not to show it. "Can I have a report on the status of the Cargo, please?"

The oddly liquid, metallic holograms slid into place one by one, listing seeds that were germinating, embryos gestating, and things that were still in hibernation. We are expecting to be ready shortly after planetfall, Sacajawea observed. There will be a short delay before colonization can begin. I estimate three weeks.

"That's only only to be expected after the interruption in power," said the Vision.

We have lost approximately one half of one percent of the embryos, Sacajawea added. The loss is significant, but we can work with it.

The Vision nodded. "Tiresias, if you would be so good as to remove the connector from my neck? You and Tony had continue to monitor and debug the AI, but I need to meet a space probe at Jupiter."

Tiresias knew what that meant. "All right," she said. The Vision turned so that she could pull the little device free, and she put it away in a compartment before taking out a crystal in a case – another token. This was a dangerous, but essential, part of their plan. None of them knew for sure whether
Polyphemus was automatically aware of where the Mind Gem was. The Vision remembered Dr. Foster saying that she knew the Aether still existed, but not its location. If they wanted to draw Polyphemus away from Brisingr and away from the Earth, they needed to let it know where the Vision was going to be.

Not only was that dangerous to Tiresias, it was dangerous to the plan itself. They knew now, and really should have expected from the start, that Polyphemus was not stupid. It wasn't some mindless monster. It could interpret and plan, and would probably be on guard in case they tried to trap it. They would have to rely on the fact that nothing could outwit a nuclear explosion.

Tiresias sat down cross-legged and closed her eyes, holding the token case in both hands. The Vision and Prometheus were on hand to take it from her if they needed to, but for the moment they kept their distance, not wanting to disturb her. It was eerie to watch, the way she relaxed as she projected. She was still breathing, clearly still alive, and yet her body was unoccupied. It didn't look like sleep, nor did it look like death. The Vision had to wonder what he had looked like when Wanda had swept them both out to the Kuiper Belt to contact Brisingr for the first time. Perhaps he ought to see if Friday still had the security footage.

Then Tiresias opened her eyes and set the token down, still quite calm. “I'm done.”

The Vision glanced at Prometheus' mask and got a nod in return – the people back on Earth understood why he was worried. “That was fast,” said Tony's voice.

“It's mind-to-mind communication. It's always fast,” said Tiresias, but her expression was also deeply troubled. “I told Polyphemus you were leaving, and asked it to spare the Cargo. I know it heard me, but it said nothing. It didn't even try to drain the token again.” She held up the case – the crystal inside was shining just as bright as when she and the Vision had made it a few days earlier. “It knows this is a trap.”

“Yes, but this time we will both be on our guard,” said the Vision. Unlike Tiresias' previous attempt. “This time we know that it knows this is a trap.”

“But what if it knows that we know that it knows...” Tony began.

The Vision couldn't see his smile, but had a good idea what it must look like. “Please don't, Tony.” He re-solidified a bit to take Tiresias' hand and help her to her feet. “I hope we can work together again in the future, Tiresias. It has been instructive.”

“You don't hope for that,” she replied, shaking her head. “Nobody does. There's a reason my name is Bad News.”

“You gave yourself that name,” the Vision reminded her. “Maybe in the future you'll have the opportunity to take on a more auspicious one. Aegeria, perhaps,” he suggested. “It means She Who Inspires, and is the name of a mythological figure who supposedly taught law and religious observance to an uncivilized people.”

“Oh, no, I don't think so,” she said. “I am not an Aegeria.”

Tiresias had refueled the Vision's repulsors and topped up his oxygen so that he could make the trip to Jupiter. It was a long one, even at the speeds Tony's technology was capable of, fully a quarter of the way around the solar system. The scenery, however, was well worth the long trip.

A thousand children's science books repeated the fact that Jupiter was eleven times the size of the Earth, but it was quite another thing to actually hover over the surface of Ganymede and see it. It
loomed silently in the sky some fifteen times larger than the full moon as seen from Earth, and he had a hard time shaking the feeling that he ought to duck so as not to bump his head against it. It was also a violent world of howling winds and storms that sizzled with lightning a hundred times more powerful than any terrestrial storm, and surrounded by shells of radiation that would cook a human astronaut in his or her spacesuit, but from a distance the clouds looked surprisingly serene, the brown and white swirling through each other like cream dissolving into coffee.

The Vision was recording everything he saw and sensed of the planet in his memory banks for the edification of Dr. Foster and her colleagues, but there was no time to make a proper study. He had arrived at the giant planet just hours ahead of the probe Tony called *Nemo*. As soon as Polyphemus caught up with them, there would be work to be done, and the longer he took about it, the more likely Polyphemus would figure out what it was he was doing.

When he spotted the probe coming, it also meant he could use it to piggyback his transmissions again, and hold real-time conversations with Earth. As he flew out to meet it on its way into the system, he took the opportunity to say hello.

“I am approaching Nemo now,” he announced. “It appears to be right on target.”

*Of course it does,* Tony’s voice replied. *It’s good to hear from you again, buddy. When this is over we have got to make more of an effort to keep in touch!*

With the Vision supervising, Nemo made its orbital insertion burn and then shed its outer shell. It was a much larger machine than anything Tony had yet launched – once the housing drifted away, the spacecraft unfolded like a flower into an array of sensors and equipment the size of a backyard trampoline. These were the devices that could detect and reflect gravity waves in order to get the bomb past Polyphemus’ defenses, or defend the machine itself from Brisingr if it had to. In the middle was the main computer, the Quantum Pot transmitter to keep it in touch with the console on Earth, and the weapons pay, where the bombs were kept.

*Everything looks set,* said Tony, proud of himself. *Don't worry, Terry – your monster is in the bag.*

The Vision had been out of touch with Tiresias as well, but Nemo was connected to the same console as Prometheus, and Prometheus was still with Brisingr, so he had no problem transmitting to her, either. “Tiresias,” he said. “I hope you’re well.” Sacajawea would not be as effective as Pandora or himself at talking her out of suicide.

*Greetings, Vision,* said Tiresias, but her next question was directed at Tony. *What is ‘Terry’? You've called me that before. I understand that you're addressing me, but what does it mean?*

*It doesn't mean anything,* Tony told her. *It's a nickname.*

*I don't want a name that doesn't mean anything,* she protested. *That's as bad as no name at all!*

*No, no,* Tony assured her, *it's not an insult. It's a thing we do on Earth as a form of familiarity. I'm not being really formal with a stranger anymore. I'm calling you by a shortened name because I know you. I just don't know if I like calling you Bad News, he added. It's like it's a jinx.*

Tiresias probably *did* believe she was a jinx, but that was not her objection. *I'd rather have a name that means something,* she said. *Is that really how they give names on your world? I've wondered. Are they nothing but pretty sounds?*

*Mostly,* said Tony. *Sometimes you're named after some other person. My parents called me Anthony in honour of one of my father's friends.*
That is why you described a person named Sacajawea to me, Tiresias said thoughtfully. I can understand that, but why...

“This will be a very interesting discussion,” the Vision interrupted, “but I'm afraid we're going to have to put it on hold. Polyphemus is only hours away, and we have much to prepare.”

As they worked through the tests of Nemo and the details of their plan, the Vision also found time to think ahead to the future. Hopefully this would all be over soon. Then, as Tony had pointed out, they would have to resume dealing with the still-unanswered question of whether humanity would allow the Brisings to settle in the solar system. Assuming that were peacefully resolved as well, then they could finally begin sorting out exactly what the relationship between the two civilizations would be. The Vision wasn't sure Tony and Tiresias would be good friends – they were entirely too much alike for that – but surely there was much they could learn from each other. He was looking forward to that, to when this would all start to be profitable instead of frustrating.

The way Polyphemus bent space around itself meant that it could be seen coming from a very long way off – Dr. Foster had spotted it when it was still light-years distant – but could never be glimpsed as an actual object. As it moved across the sky, stars seemed to divide in two and then join back together again like drops of rain on a car windshield, and the effect got more and more pronounced until suddenly it was right there within the Jovian system. From the Vision's point of view it passed in front of Callisto, making the moon appear to turn inside-out and then right itself again.

_Showtime_, Tony declared.

The Vision flew away from Nemo and took up a position where he would be silhouetted against Jupiter from Polyphemus' point of view. That should make him as obvious as possible, but he was still worried it might not be enough – he was such a tiny mote against the looming immensity of the planet, how could it possibly pick him out? Shouting wouldn't get its attention, because sound didn't carry in space. Instead, the Vision focused on the glow of the Mind Gem, brightening it until it surely could not be missed, especially by a being whose ultimate goal was to find it.

It didn't seem to work. Rather than head for the Vision, Polyphemus moved towards somewhere on his left, as if to pass Jupiter by entirely. Curious, the Vision fired his thrusters to follow.

_Not too close now_, Tony cautioned him.

“I just want to know where it's going,” said the Vision.

He refocused his optics, zooming in on Polyphemus. The bubble of space appeared to be heading for the inner moons, Io and Europa. Io was a sulfurous, volcanic place – perhaps, being familiar with the sulfur and silicon based life of the Brisings, Polyphemus thought Io was the most likely of Jupiter's moons to harbour life. Instead, however, it passed Io by, and headed instead for Europa. Scientists had speculated for years that there might be living things in a water ocean underneath Europa's icy crust. Polyphemus must be able to sense them.

Tiresias had described how, when it was in touch with the Mind Gem through her, Polyphemus hadn't needed to visit a world in order to consume it. The inhabitants' own psychic abilities and the fact that Tiresias had briefly made contact with them had been enough. Now, under only its own power, it couldn't devour at a distance. Polyphemus had to get close to the moon, until the area of distorted stars seemed to be hovering only a few feet above its surface, and then the space around it unfolded to reveal what lay beneath.

Polyphemus was a giant lattice of crystals, pricking with irregular spires and spurs. It might have been quartz, or it might have been a cluster of diamonds the size of Alaska. The Vision could not
properly analyze its refractive index to find out, because the light passing through the structure was augmented by a light from within. The entire lattice was full of a glowing white liquid with a pearly sheen to its surface, like an oil slick on milk, pulsing in and out of the many crystal facets.

Are you seeing this, buddy? asked Tony, watching through Nemo's cameras. He sounded unable to believe his own eyes.

The Vision knew that his optics were functioning properly, and therefore he had to believe them. “Yes, I am,” he said, “but I don’t know what it is I’m seeing.” He had no frame of reference for this thing or how it functioned.

Polyphemus reached out with tendrils of the shining liquid, and touched the crust of Europa.

Since the first Voyager flyby in 1979, scientists had known that Europa’s smooth icy crust was riddled with cracks, and that the material welling up from the ocean beneath to fill them was tinted brownish-red. Spectra suggested organic clays in these deposits, which hinted at life – and as Polyphemus touched the surface, its effect was both extraordinary and terrifying. Immediately, the brown deposits began turning black in a circle that spread out from the point of contact. Knowing what Polyphemus did, there was only one possible interpretation. The brown material was dying.

If it could die, then it was alive – and if it were alive, it was worth saving.

“Tony,” said the Vision.

Now's our chance, while it's got its armor off, Tony agreed. We're going in.

A compartment in the center of Nemo opened, and a drone launched itself towards the looming monstrosity. After Polyphemus had apparently failed to notice the Vision, it seemed impossible that it would see this tiny thing coming – and yet, somehow, it did. It retracted its tentacles and the wall of space folded back around it, swallowing the glowing crystals and cutting them off from the rest of the universe.

Watch the magic work, Tony said.

Machinery in Nemo's array of instruments and panels whirred to life. The Vision was able to tap into the signals it was sending to Earth, so he could see the map it made of space around Polyphemus and Europa. The pocket of reality where Asgard sat was stable and self-maintaining, but as Tony had predicted, the one Polyphemus had created for itself was not. Dozens of tiny wormholes were constantly opening and closing all around it. Each lasted only seconds, but there was soon a clear pattern in their appearances. Some parts of the pocket were much weaker than others.

Gotcha said Tony.

The drone aimed for the most delicate point, and when a wormhole next appeared, one of Dr. Selvig's devices forced it open. Drone and payload vanished into the fold of space.

Immediately, the curtain opened again and Polyphemus emerged into normal reality. Then incredibly, it divided in two like a cell undergoing mitosis. The bomb drone flew between the two halves and kept going, speeding towards Jupiter itself. Polyphemus rejoined into one mass, and the drone faded into invisibility against the disk of the big planet. A few slow minutes passed, and then a tiny flare of light was all that marked a seventy megaton explosion. As Tony had predicted, Jupiter could take the hit.

Polyphemus slipped into its cocoon again.
“Interesting,” said the Vision. “How lucky we thought to bring a spare.”

And this time I'll know when to hit the brakes, Tony agreed.

Another part of Nemo opened, and a second drone fired off. This time, they were going to get it right.

Polyphemus must have seen this one coming, too, because the bubble of distorted space began to move. Rather than trying to get out of the way, though, it came even closer to Europa. The little moon seemed to stretch and almost tie itself in a knot, then suddenly bounced back into its normal, round shape. The bomb impacted on the surface, blowing a crater in the ice and opening it to the ocean below. Water sprayed into space, where it instantly re-froze into an expanding cloud of glittering microscopic ice crystals.

What? Tony demanded. What the hell was that?

The Vision studied the gravity wave data, replaying what had just occurred and attempting to analyze the entity's movement. “I think Polyphemus has taken its fold in spacetime inside Europa,” he said. “There are still wormholes in and out, but they are now encased in rock and ice.”

Shit! The Vision heard something break, as if Tony had reacted to the setback by throwing an object against the wall. All right, fine. I'm putting the remaining bombs in orbit of Europa, he decided. If it comes out, it gets blasted apart. We've got it trapped at least.

“Trapped is not the same as destroyed,” the Vision said, “but it will buy us time.”

Then a new voice entered the conversation. Tiresias had been listening to all this, but had not had very much to say. Now they heard her cry out in pain.

Terry? Tony asked.

The first thing they heard from her was a desperate shriek of get out, get out, get out! Then there was only the sound of laboured breathing. The Vision began to worry that Polyphemus had done something to her, but then she finally spoke.

It talked to me, she panted. Polyphemus. It says the Vision must surrender the Mind Gem, or it will send this moon crashing into your world.

That's impossible, Tony said immediately, but he must not have been sure because a moment later he asked, isn't it?

In that moment, Tony was almost certainly doing what the Vision himself was also doing: checking the map of the gravitational landscape produced by Nemo. Sure enough, it was changing. By warping the space around it to counteract Jupiter's gravity, Polyphemus was moving Europa out of its orbit.

It says it will take only days to reach the Earth, Tiresias added.

“I refuse,” said the Vision.

Of course you do, Tony agreed. We're not going to let this thing blackmail us.

But Tiresias said, you refuse?

The Vision explained. “If Europa impacts the Earth, it will kill every living thing there,” he said.
“That is a fact. But if I give the Mind Gem to Polyphemus, we have already ascertained that it will consume every mind in the galaxy. That is countless trillions more deaths than in the destruction of Earth alone, and the inhabitants of Earth will still be among the victims. Therefore, I must refuse.”

Both his interlocutors were quiet for a moment.

*I guess that is the logical choice,* Tony said. He sounded as if he hadn't even thought of it that way.

“I'm sorry, Tony,” the Vision told him. And he was sorry – but protecting life meant protecting *all* life, Earthly and otherwise.

*No, it's okay,* said Tony. *It's not going to come to that. We're not going to let it come to that.*

*How?* Tiresias asked. *That moon is a quarter the size of your planet! It will obliterate...* 

*Right, right, I know that,* Tony assured her. *We're the Avengers, Terry. This is what we do.*

Tony *had* been surprised by the Vision's coldly logical reasoning behind sacrificing Earth to save the rest of the galaxy, but he didn't let it bother him for long. It probably wasn't what Tony would have done in the same situation, but then, Tony couldn't really imagine what he would have done. He knew he couldn't just turn the Gem over, but nor could he have refused in the knowledge that doing so would doom an entire planet. Maybe he would have grabbed the remaining Nemo bombs and flown in to blow the thing up on a suicide mission – but that hadn't worked so well when Tiresias had tried it.

So the Vision had chosen the nearest thing on hand to a right answer, and taken the choice that would kill the fewest people. That was a guy with his priorities in order, and it actually made Tony kind of proud. He'd probably had less to do with who and what the Vision had turned out to be than he liked to think, but Tony still got that fond, fatherly smile when he thought about the android's accomplishments.

Right now, however, *Tony's* priority was trying to explain what had just happened to a room full of Avengers and associates. Fury and Hill were at the far end of the table, having returned from wherever the hell it was they went when they weren't around. Steve, Wilson, and Rhodey were on the right, with Barton, Natasha, Selvig, and Helen on the left. It seemed like a very small group in the big room. So many people were missing – Thor was on Asgard, the Vision was in space, Bruce was in hiding, and Wanda and Dr. Foster might well be on the other side of the galaxy. Maybe that last one was a good thing. Wherever they were, it was probably safer than here.

“So that's basically it,” Tony said as he summed up. “Polyphemus is going to smash a moon into the planet in the hope that the Vision will chicken out and give it the Mind Gem. We can't talk it out of doing so because it doesn't listen to reason. We can't get out of the way because there's no out of the way for us to get to. We can't give it what it wants because we die that way, too. That really only leaves us one option, which is... and I have to add,” he put in, holding up a finger, “that this *hurts* me, because Europa is my *favourite moon.* But we have to find some way to destroy it before it gets here.”

There was silence while everybody digested that. The first one to speak was Steve.

“We're going to blow up the moon,” he said, in the same flat, not-quite believing tone as he'd once said *an army, from outer space.*

*“Not the Moon,”* Tony corrected him, “*a moon. One of Jupiter's. Jupiter has lots, if that helps.*” He didn't think it did. Blowing up a moon would probably make them legitimately supervillains, no
matter whose moon it was.

“Call the X-Men,” Fury muttered with a glance up at Hill – and to everybody's astonishment, she actually picked up the handout Tony had passed around, rolled it up, and hit Fury very lightly over the head.

“Inside joke,” she said calmly, unrolling the pages to put them back down again.

“You're the expert on blowing sh... stuff up,” said Steve, nodding at Tony. “So how do we blow up... a moon?”

“Well, we can't do it with anything we have here on Earth,” Tony admitted.

“You guys were gonna blow up all of Brisingr when you thought it was just a comet,” Miss Lewis pointed out.

“This is a totally different scale, Darcy,” said Dr. Selvig.

“Brisingr is big,” Tony agreed, “but it's something we can measure in metres. This is thousands of miles. As Tiresias helpfully pointed out, Europa is almost as big as our Moon and wrapped in a couple of miles of ice. All the nukes on Earth put together would only warm the water a little. We're going to have to think a bit more creatively.”

“All right,” said Fury. “What's your creative solution?”

“If it can't be done on Earth, we should call Thor,” Steve said. “Asgardian technology is centuries beyond ours.”

Natasha didn't look optimistic. “If Asgard has time and inclination,” she said. “They've got their own problems right now.”

“We don't need much from Asgard,” Tony said. “The way I figure, Dr. Foster had the right idea but the wrong Infinity Stone.”

That got everybody's attention.

“The Tesseract?” asked Selvig.

“Exactly!” Tony smiled. “Tiresias told us that an Infinity Stone can destroy Polyphemus. Dr. Foster wanted to do it herself with the Aether, but that would probably kill her. However, SHIELD had been playing with the Tesseract for decades and had some pretty good ideas how to harness its energy into great big explosions.” He looked Fury in the eye. “I know. I checked.”

Fury stood up. “We had some specialized equipment for working with the Tesseract. I can get it out of storage if you can get me the stone itself.”

“It's in storage on Asgard,” said Dr. Selvig. “Jane told me she'd seen it there. I'll talk to Thor.”

“I'll get the Quantum Pot,” Tony said with a nod.

After warning the Vision and Tiresias that they would be out of communication for a while, Tony dragged the Quantum Pot out of the console again to try and raise Thor. This whole mess, he thought, from the very beginning, had been a constant tax on his ingenuity. He would come up with a solution to a problem – and then everything would flip on its head and it would turn out that nothing was what he'd thought it was and he'd have to think of something else entirely to solve the
real problem. Maybe he was being tested, or maybe he was being punished. Maybe this just sucked.

Tony turned the Pot right-side up, and Selvig held a hand over it as Dr. Foster had shown him. “Thor!” he called out. “Thor, are you there?”

Thor didn't reply, but one of his friends did – Hogun, the one he'd said was from Vanaheim. The image that materialized showed him in full, battered, Mongol-style armor, with blood on it that hopefully wasn't his.

“What word?” he asked. “Be quick!”

“We need Thor,” said Selvig. “He told us to call him if we needed him desperately, and we need him.” He paused. “Desperately.”

“I'll fetch him,” said Hogun, and his shape dissolved. For a few minutes there was only the silvery fog welling up to creep across the floor – then it swirled into the air again and formed Thor.

“What word of Jane and Wanda?” was his first question.

“No,” said Selvig. “I'm sorry, none. But we have a new problem.”

“Another?” asked Thor. It was somewhat reassuring, Tony decided, that even he could get sick and tired of this bullshit.

“Really, it's just the same problem in a new form,” Selvig decided. “Stark, would you like to explain?”

Tony stepped up to the Pot and did so, as briefly as he could – like Hogun, Thor was fully armored and banged-up, and he didn't doubt there was a lot going on in Asgard that needed Thor's attention. He ran through the situation quickly, and finished with what he'd said at the conference table earlier. “Tiresias said an Infinity Stone can destroy Polyphemus, and we're pretty sure it can blow up Europa, too. SHIELD's got the gear. We just need the Tesseract.”

He expected a reply immediately, whether yes or no, but instead Thor just lowered his head and stood there silently for a moment. When he looked up again, the expression his face was surprising. He wasn't angry, or grim, or even smiling. Instead, he looked... crushed, Tony decided, as if everything he had just slipped out from under him. It was an uncomfortably familiar emotion.

“I'm sorry,” said Thor. “Loki took the Tesseract when he fled. Heimdall is searching for him, as well as for Jane and Wanda, but he could be on the other side of the cosmos for all we know.”

Tony's first thought was Heimdall's out of jail – that means the good guys are winning. Then the rest of the statement got through. Loki had escaped, and that was bad. He'd taken the Tesseract with him, and that was worse. Thor looked upset because he'd had to tell them that the most vital part of their plan was missing.

Of course it was. The universe had just upped the ante again. Tony was going to have to think more creatively. He just hoped he had any creativity left.
What the Duck

At this point Tony was quite used to staying up most of the night, brainstorming with Tiresias and the Vision – and it was a good thing, too, because if he hadn't been used to going without sleep he probably would have keeled over. Even as it was, a nugget of panic was growing somewhere deep under his ribs, right where the arc reactor had used to be, and it was getting more and more difficult to keep a lid on it. Tony did his best, because he knew none of them could afford for him to panic. Panic made it hard to think, and right now thinking was all he could do, so he just reminded himself to breathe and relax, resisted the urge to jump into a suit and fly around the world a couple of times to clear his head. Stay calm. Think creatively.

“Okay,” he said to Tiresias, around four in the morning, “is there anyway you could get to Earth before Polyphemus does? Just rev up your engines or whatever and bring the whole caravan here?”

“Possibly,” said Tiresias.

_The course correction required would cause us to overshoot Venus and leave the solar system altogether_, said Sacajawea. _The singularity is almost spent. There would not be enough power left to turn around again._

“We'll come and get you, then,” said Tony. “Launch a rescue mission. The point is, if you can get here before Polyphemus, then you can use that gravity weapon to shatter Europa.”

“The Dislocator?” Tiresias asked. “That's for dealing with debris. It doesn't have the power to destroy a thing as big as The Wide-Eyed One.” That was the translation the Vision had given her for the name Europa. She had expressed confusion as to why it would be given to a thing with no eyes at all, but appeared satisfied that it was named after a person.

“Can you augment it?” asked Tony. “Give it more power?”

“The singularity isn't big enough to provide it,” Tiresias said. “Using it saps a lot of energy.”

“So enlarge the singularity,” Tony suggested. Another obstacle, another idea... it never ended! “Feed it more mass. The solar system is full of crap that's just floating around smacking into things. Chuck a couple of asteroids in there. We've got some old satellites you can have. _Something._”

_Feeding the singularity would result in a violent gamma ray burst_, Sacajawea reminded them.

Tony thumped on the desk – of course, and the gamma rays would kill the embryos and seeds on board. “God _damn_ it!” he said, then once again made himself breathe, made himself count to give and calm down. “Okay, Tiresias, listen,” said Tony. “I don't like to brag, but I'm one of the greatest engineers my planet has ever produced, and you might be the greatest scientist in the history of yours. Surely, if the two of us put our heads together...” but he stopped halfway through that statement and rubbed his face. The _two_ of them. Polyphemus was _billions_ of heads put together. It had outwitted them at every turn so far. “Shit,” he said softly. “What if we can't do this?”

“You told me not to give up,” Tiresias said. “Maybe there's... maybe I'll...”

She sounded as if she knew what the end of that sentence was, but she trailed off and remained quiet for so long that Tony felt he had to prompt her.

“Maybe you'll what?” he asked.
“Maybe I'll just have to sacrifice the Cargo,” she whispered. “If that's how it has to be.”

There was no mistaking the pain this idea caused her, and thinking about it made Tony feel a little ill, too. He wanted to tell her that was a ridiculous idea, that he wouldn't let her, that there had to be another way, and yet he said nothing. Having said that, what would he follow it with?

“You know,” he said. “There was this guy named Frank Drake. He came up with an equation to figure out how many civilizations there might be in the galaxy, and one of the variables in it was $L$. $L$ is the lifetime of a species – how long we can last and keep building stuff before we blow ourselves to bits. That was just part of the life cycle to him. Stars form, life appears, intelligence evolves, and then it all ends in a boom. Maybe that's just how it works. Maybe we're all destined to create something that ultimately destroys us.” That was what Ultron had said to Wanda and Pietro, wasn't it? “Because so far, I've been the ideas guy of this whole operation, but at the moment, Terry... I am completely out of ideas.”

There. He'd said it. It was almost a relief. He knew what his limit was now, knew where Tony Stark would finally give up. It was right here.

“No, I'll do it,” said Tiresias. “If my world has to die so that yours can live...”

Tony shook his head. “You don't mean that. After five million years and a whole galaxy, you can't give up when you're on the doorstep of your destination.” He couldn't ask that of her. Tony didn't want any more deaths on his conscience, not even unborn creatures from another planet.

But when Tiresias replied, her tone was firm. “My world is already dead,” she said. “I've been clinging to the idea of bringing it back, but after all this time... maybe what I really needed... what I really needed all along was to let it go.” Her voice broke, and the resolve drowned in an involuntary sob. “My world is already dead,” she repeated, “but I can save yours. This is my mess. I want to clean it up.”

Tony didn't answer. What could he possibly say to that? Tony still didn't quite trust Tiresias but the emotion in her words was so genuine. He couldn't sit here silently forever, though, so he opened his mouth to force himself to say something, anything – but maybe it was fortunate that before he could decide what, FRIDAY spoke up.

Boss? she said. There's an unknown craft landing on the helipad.

Tony raised his head from the console, frowning. “An un... what kind of unknown craft?” he asked.

A flying vessel that does not match any configuration in my database, the computer replied, including Asgardian, Brising, or Chi'Tauri. Most likely of alien origin.

Tony stood up. “Oh, that's just fucking great!” he said. “That's fantastic! We needed more aliens! We need more aliens like we need a giant moon smashing into our planet! Terry, I'll be right back.” He straightened his shirt. “Gimme Veronica, FRIDAY. I need them to know I'm not messing around.”

I will prepare the satellite, FRIDAY said, but the craft is already departing again. It has dropped off three passengers and is returning to space.

“Good. Easy to deal with three,” said Tony. “I'll drop-kick them into Canada and they can be somebody else's problem. Give me video. I need to know what I'm up against.” He was already climbing the stairs to the hangar to get into a suit.

They are Dr. Foster, Miss Maximoff, and a duck, said FRIDAY.
Tony stopped dead. “What?” he asked.

The hologram he’d asked for appeared. There was a complex-looking delta-shaped craft, painted blue and white, that had lowered a ramp to the helipad on the roof. Three figures came down and waved goodbye, and the vessel flew away. Tony couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He pushed the image aside and climbed the rest of the stairs two at a time, bursting out onto the roof entirely suitless.

And there they were. Dr. Foster and Wander were dressed in flowing gowns that looked like something out of *Game of Thrones*, and with them was... yes, that was a duck. Or... it *must* have been a duck, because Tony wouldn't have known how else to describe it. The creature was about three and a half feet tall, basically duck-shaped but also sort of human-shaped, and it was wearing a suit. A tweed suit with patches on the elbows, and a tie. As Tony watched, it lit a cigarette with a Bic lighter.

It took a few seconds of staring and blinking before he could actually manage a response, and when he did, it was another, “what?”

“Stark!” Dr. Foster hurried up to him and for a moment looked like she would actually hug him, but stopped short of that. “I'm actually happy to see you!”

“Where's the Vision?” asked Wanda.

“He's in space. Watching out for the moon of Jupiter that's going to smash into the Earth tomorrow,” said Tony.

Dr. Foster frowned, then looked at Wanda. “Is this what happens when you leave these guys alone for ten minutes?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Wanda.

“Ten minutes?” Tony said. “You've been gone for two weeks! What's with the duck?” He pointed to it.

The duck itself held out a feathery, three-fingered hand. “Howard,” it said.

Tony stared at the hand, but did not take it.

The duck looked at its hand, then up at Tony. “What'th the matter?” it asked “You got thomething againstth duckth?”

“No, but the name *Howard* has some unpleasant associations,” Tony said. He wouldn't have thought anything could really qualify as *weird* to him anymore, not after the gods and the aliens and the robots and all that stuff... but this was a talking *duck*. Rather than try to deal with it, he tried to talk to the women again. “Where have you been? Why were you in space? How'd you get back? And why do you have a duck na...” he paused. “Wait. Howard the Duck? Like the movie?”

“Yeah,” sighed Dr. Foster. “He's here to see his movie. We did warn him.” She shook out her skirts. “Can we go inside? It's a long story and I haven't had a cup of coffee in two weeks. And we desperately need to change our clothes,” she added with a look at Wanda, who nodded.

Other people besides Tony had heard the sound of the spacecraft, and now they were starting to arrive on the rooftop to find out what was happening. Dr. Selvig was among the first to appear, dressed in a nightshirt and slippers. He reached the top of the stairs just as Tony was letting the women and their odd guest inside. He was astonished and overjoyed to see them, and immediately
grabbed Dr. Foster for a hug.

“Jane!” he exclaimed. “You're all right – Thor said Heimdall searched for you in Knowhere, but could only learn that you'd taken the Aether and vanished again!”

“He did?” asked Tony. “Nobody told me that!”

“You were busy,” said Selvig.

“By the time Heimdall arrived we'd probably already left,” Dr. Foster told him. “We really didn't want to hang around...”

Miss Lewis was the next to come charging up the steps, meeting them at the second landing from the top. She was wearing a set of leopard-print footie pajamas. “Jane!” she squealed, running to hug Doctors Foster and Selvig both. “Where'd you go? How'd you get back?” She opened her eyes and looked over Dr. Foster's shoulder, and then raised an arm to point. “Is that a duck?”

“You know,” Howard sighed, “thith ithh really thhkarting to affect my thelf-ethiteem.”

Miss Lewis' jaw dropped and she let go of the two astronomers to approach the duck. “Oh, my god!” she said, as if meeting a favourite celebrity. “You're Howard the Duck!”

“He is,” said Dr. Foster.

“I am,” agreed the duck.

Miss Lewis squealed for joy. “I love Howard the Duck!”

“You do?” asked Tony.

“You do?” Dr. Foster echoed.

“It's a movie where a duck saves Cleveland from horrors beyond space and time! How can you not love that?” Miss Lewis took the duck's hand in both of hers and shook it with great enthusiasm. “I'm Darcy! Huge fan!”

Dr. Foster sighed.

Tony noticed that Wanda had sidled out of the group while the affectionate greetings went on, and was now descending the steps again – she went down to the third landing and stopped there, leaning on the wall to watch. With her brother dead and the Vision in space, there was nobody here she was particularly close to – and as much of a pain in the ass as she'd been to Tony personally, he had to feel a little sorry for her for that. Being along was no fun. He inched past the others and headed down to offer her a hand.

“Good to have you back,” he said. “We've been worried, especially the Vizh.”

“Did he change his mind?” Wanda asked, hopeful. “He didn't give Tiresias the Gem?”

“No, she took it,” said Tony, “but she gave it back after and apparently that was okay. It'll be nice to give him some good news. We haven't had much of that.” He gave Wanda's hand a squeeze – a hug would have seemed far too personal – and then looked up at the others. “How about that coffee, Foster?”

“Sounds great,” Dr. Foster agreed.
The next twenty minutes or so were consumed in waking everybody up and getting them into the kitchen, where everybody sat down for coffee and donuts while listening to Dr. Foster, Wanda, and the duck tell their story. A few, like Steve and Pepper, got dressed first. Others, like Wilson and Barton, showed up in their night clothes. It had seemed like a small group in the conference room, but it was a big one in the kitchen. Tony set up a radio, so that the Vision would be able to listen in as well.

“So Thor told us you went to Asgard to ask Odin about the Aether,” Dr. Selvig prompted.

“That's right,” said Dr. Foster. “Only it wasn't Odin at all, it was Loki in disguise.” She described what had happened next – how she and Wanda had revealed Loki and been thrown into prison for it. How they'd escaped with help from the real Odin, and then the weird interlude in space where they'd picked up the duck and robbed the being who called himself the Collector. And then, Aether in hand, they'd tried to call for a ride home.

After Jane had called Heimdall's name, the three of them – two women and one waterfowl – stood there in the pipe for several long, uncomfortably silent seconds. Jane's own breathing and heartbeat seemed terribly loud to her, but at least they mostly drowned out the nasty rustling sound as the extraterrestrial slime inched away from their feet. Where was the Bifrost? They couldn't just stand here.

“Heimdall!” she repeated.

“Are you thure your transmitter ith turned on?” asked Howard, in the tone of somebody just trying to be helpful.

“It's not a transmitter. He can see and hear anywhere in the Nine Realms,” said Jane. “Why wouldn't he answer me? I've seen Thor do this a dozen times!” She paused as an awful possibility occurred to her. “Oh, no, what if only Asgardians can do it?” Would Heimdall really send them if he couldn't bring them back? They'd been in such a hurry, maybe he'd just figured they would work out the details later...

“He planned to wait for us,” said Wanda. “I could see it in his mind. He knew I could read him, and he wanted me to know he would watch carefully and we'd be safe. Something else must have gone wrong.”

Something else. With Loki's mooks chasing them through the streets in the middle of the night and Odin proclaiming he would take his throne back from Loki... Jane realized with a sinking feeling that they had no reason to think any of it had gone well. For all they knew Odin had been recaptured or killed and Asgard was still in Loki's hands. Heimdall might be dead, or under orders not to bring them back. They might be stuck here – and they didn't even know where here was, other than that it was apparently nowhere.

“If he'ith not coming, then we can't thay here,” said Howard. “The Collector knowth all thethe tunnelth. If we thay here, we're...” he paused.

Jane looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Dead ducks?” she guessed.

“I wath going to thay tootht,” Howard informed her.

He was still holding on to the Aether, which continued to shake and throw itself against the walls of its container so violently that it was close to knocking Howard off his feet. Jane took pity and collected it from him – and to her surprise, that seemed to quiet it. It retreated into the space between
the two stones and stayed there, as if it were shrinking in fear from her. She tucked it into her purse, but felt it immediately start to struggle again. Maybe she needed to touch it. She stuck a hand in the bag and put it on the case, and the shaking immediately stopped.

“I think it’s happier now,” she said. Who would have expected an Infinity Stone to be like a needy cat, demanding constant attention?

Howard gestured for them to follow. “This way, ladies. I have a friend who might let us lie low at her place for a while.”

He led them on a roundabout route through the tunnels, with innumerable twists and turns that Jane suspected were less about getting anywhere and more about losing anyone who might be following them. The larger tunnels had lights in them, in the form of greenish glowing panels set into the walls, but some of the smaller ones were totally dark. Wanda lit up a ball of glowing red energy to light their way through these, but that almost made it worse. Her magic cast moving shadows that looked as if they were full of alien shapes, waiting to pounce. The smells, and there was a shocking variety of smells, were absolutely beyond description.

“Where are we going, exactly?” Jane asked. She’d bunched up her skirts and draped them over one arm to keep them out of the muck, but she had to keep rearranging them so they wouldn’t slip/

“The restaurant at the end of the universe,” replied Howard.

“For real?” asked Jane. How many things from how many books and movies were actually out here?

“Not really,” said Howard regretfully. “If it were, the drinks’d be better.”

“Is it at least a wretched hive of scum and villainy?” Jane asked.

“Oh, yeth,” he said.

“So the music will be catchy, anyway,” said Jane.

Finally, they climbed another ladder and emerged in a tiny, dark space that was rather surprisingly recognizable as a janitor's closet – there was a drain in the floor with a set of taps above it, and a set of very ordinary-looking brooms and mops. Howard went and knocked on the inside of the door.

There were some rummaging sounds from outside, and the door opened to reveal a large shaggy dark creature with what appeared to be an old-fashioned diving helmet on its head. It was also wearing a frilly pink and white apron.

“Hi,” said Howard.

The creature made a series of moaning and whistling noises, some of them at deep baritone pitches that made Jane's insides uncomfortable.

“Of court he ith!” Howard said. “I juth thtole one of hith mothr prithed pothetionth!”

The helmeted thing made more noises. It was, Jane thought, like listening to Daffy Duck have a conversation with a Wookiee.

“They’re with me,” said Howard. “We need a plate to lay low for a while.”

“No, we don’t,” said Jane. “We need a way to get out of this... space skull, or whatever it is, and get back to our home planet!”
“A friend of mine is in terrible danger and we're the only ones who can save him,” Wanda added, “because nobody will listen to us!"

The creature took this in, then made more tone-deaf whale noises, gesturing emphatically as it did. Then it turned around and stomped off, leaving the door open a crack. Howard nodded, satisfied.

“The thayth the'll thee what the’ can do,” he said. “In the mean time, we'd better thay here. The doethn't want her cuhtomerth to thee us. The Collector’th already got a prithe on our headth.”

“He doesn't waste time, does he?” remarked Wanda, as they settled down in a circle on the floor. It was damp. Of course it was.

“He' th the richetht, mo/hth powerful perthon in Knowhere,” said Howard. “He really doethn't.”

Crammed and moist as it was, the closet was significantly less disgusting than the maintenance tunnels, or even some of the streets outside. There were far worse places they could have been made to wait, but Jane didn't want to wait at all. If Odin had been here he would have continued complaining about her lack of patience, but what good was patience when there was a monster on its way to devour every living mind on your planet, and the people trying to stop it were only going to make things worse?

“I wonder how much time we have,” said Wanda.

“Well, the galaxy hasn't actually come to an end yet,” Jane shrugged. “That's probably a good sign. “How long do you think...” she began, but then there was a sound like breaking glass, and her purse caught fire.

“Jane!” Wanda exclaimed, pointing at it.

“I see it!” Jane shook the contents out and tossed the purse under the taps, while Howard turned on the water. Soon the bag itself was only smoldering, but something else was burning, too. When Jane went through her possessions she found that her chalk box was singed, a plastic pen had partially melted... and the box with Stark's mother's ring in it was burning like a marshmallow that had gotten too close to the campfire. “More water! I need more water!” Jane said.

Howard filled a bucket and tossed it over the ring box. Rather than putting the fire out, however, the water hissed into a cloud of steam. They had to push the door back open and let it out so that they could breathe. By the light that flooded in from the kitchen beyond, Jane was able to see that the case for the Aether had broken – one side was smashed in a spiderweb pattern with a single small hole in the middle, as if a bullet had hit it. The two stone cubes were lying there dark, and the Aether was gone. As the steam cleared, a dull red glow filled the closet.

The ring box had burned to ashes, and the gold of the setting had melted into a little puddle. Even the smaller diamonds had burned – but the big pear-shaped stone remained, glowing red from within.

All the Infinity Stones had originally been contained in crystal form. Powerful beings working long ago had placed the Tesseract in a four-dimensional matrix that allowed them to use it in folding space and time. Thanos had set the Mind Gem in the scepter where it could be used without permanently entangling the wielder or the victim. The people of Morag had kept the Power Gem in the Orb where any of them could access it – until the day it brought their worst nightmares to life and destroyed them utterly.

Malekith had pulled the force of the Aether out of its original gem so that he could absorb it directly into his body, but its liquid form was inherently unstable. It needed matter. A living host would do,
but a crystal of suitable size and durability was better, and after ten thousand years, it had finally
found on in Maria Stark's diamond. The Aether had returned to its primordial form, the Reality Gem.

“Stark's gonna kill me,” said Jane.

They had a far more immediate problem, though – the Aether, contained in its case by powerful
Asgardian magic, was something Jane could carry. The Reality Gem, bubbling just below the
surface of a tiny shard of stone, was not. Jane knew that: Loki had told her that touching the
Tesseract would kill her, and Tiresias had spoken of her people using containers for both the Mind
Gem and the tokens they made from it. Even so, Jane found herself reaching for it anyway,
mesmerized by the ruby light, until Howard grabbed her wrist.

“Don't do that!” he said. “I've theen what happeneth when thomebody toucheth one of the the thingth! That' th what happened to the other athithant I mentioned! It killed her and blew up half the
warehoutth!”

Jane quickly withdrew her hand – the spell, if that's what it had been, was broken. “What are we
supposed to do, then?” she asked. “We can't just leave it lying there. The whole reason we came here
was to take it back to Earth.”

Howard tapped the end of his beak, thinking. “The Power Gem wath in an orb,” he said. “Layerth
and layerth that had to be opened, tho nobody could touch the thtone or anything else that wath
touching the thtone. But I don't know how it worked, or what it wath made of.”

“Can't touch it, can't touch anything touching it.” Jane frowned. “We need to suspend it somehow.”
She picked up the Aether case, and pulled out the broken side to examine the two cubes of stone.
These were reddish-gray in colour, heavy, and quite cold to the touch – certainly colder than she
would have expected rocks to be after sitting in her purse, next to her body, for a couple of hours.
The bigger version where she'd originally found the Aether had been cold, as well, Jane
remembered. Freezing cold, in fact, despite the warm colour of the light around it.

She weighed the cube in her hand. “I think,” Jane said carefully, “this is hematite ore. It's weakly
ferromagnetic...” she paused, and then her eyes brightened as the answer came to her. “Until you
cool it below the Morin transition! Then it becomes antiferromagnetic! That's it!” She beamed at the
others.

Wanda just stared at her.

“I'm gonna pretend I understand that,” Howard decided.

“Oh. Sorry, I was speaking Science again, wasn't I?” Jane asked – that was what Darcy always told
her when she started using jargon. “This is a weak magnet, but when it gets cold, the electron orbitals
line up so that the atomic field... no, wait.” She took a deep breath and tried again, reminding herself
that Wanda had an eighth grade education and Howard... she didn't know about Howard. “At below
minus ten Fahrenheit it's sort of the opposite of a magnet. It's got kind of a grid with the north and
south poles pointing in different directions, so there's a very powerful field but only on a tiny scale.
The opposing fields must be what contain the Aether.”

Unfortunate, what worked for a liquid Aether was not going to work for a solid Reality Gem. The
Aether had no firm volume or shape – it could be squeezed into places narrow enough for the
conflicting magnetic fields to do their job. The gem had a shape that was literally set in stone.

“You said the Power Gem was in an orb.” Jane looked at Howard. “A sphere.”
“Yeah.” He motioned with his hands. “In layerth.”

“Layers... probably with magnetic fields pointing in opposite directions,” said Jane. “We can do it if we keep it cold. Hold this.” She handed the cubes to Wanda, and got up to take a look around the room outside. As the closet was recognizably a closet, the room beyond was a kitchen, with refrigerators and sinks and such things. Jane murmured apologies and excuse mes as she wound her way between chefs and waiters of half a dozen species, ranging from a woman who was merely bright pink all the way to a hulking creature made of crystal, wearing a chef's toque, and located a chest-like cold storage chamber containing bag of ice. On a counter a few feet away, she borrowed a container of salt from the pink woman, and brought both back to the closet. The employees watched with a variety of puzzled or annoyed expressions, but nobody actually tried to stop her.

“Ohay,” she said, rubbing her hands together to warm them. “I think I know what we need to make. I could build it in a lab, but it would take a month. We're gonna have to improvise with what we have. Wanda, how delicate is your telekinesis?” she asked. “I know you can levitate things and blow stuff up... can you mess with stuff on a molecular scale?”

“Um... I can fuse objects and re-separate them,” Wanda offered.

Jane pointed to one of the blocks of hematite, still in Wanda's hand. “Can you re-shape that? Form it into a sphere with a cavity inside just barely bigger than the gem, like less than a millimetre bigger?”

Wanda held the block up, and her face blanked as she concentrated. The stone floated up to eye level, and she held up a hand on either side of it. For the first several seconds, all she seemed able to do was to stretch the block while the corners remained square, but then she seemed to get the hang of it and the block re-shaped itself into half a sphere with an open space in the middle. At a flick of Wanda's finger, the Reality Gem lifted off the floor and, with drops of molten gold still falling from it, slotted into place. The Sphere closed over it.

At once, a red glow suffused the surface of the metal ore, and the sphere began to shake. The Gem was a quantum mechanical object, Jane recalled – the more tightly it was contained, the more energy it had. They needed to take energy away from it by cooling it off.

“Doing great,” said Jane. “Make the second block into a bigger sphere, say about an eighth of an inch think. Put the smaller one in the middle of that, and fill the space between with ice and salt. The salt will help supercool it.”

Wanda bit her lip and nodded, and as she worked Jane couldn't help wishing they'd been able to get their hands on the orb Howard had described. The containment unit Jane would have built if she'd had the time and funding would have been the size of a fridge and needed a crane to move it. The idea that somebody had done the same thing with a piece of technology the size of an orange was astonishing. Wanda's final version was about as big as a soccer ball, but the red glow and shaking her gone. Jane reached out tentatively and put her hands on it.

Nothing happened.

“Okay,” she said, putting the object in her lap. It was cold, and very heavy. “Now we just need to get it back to Earth.”
Hitchhiking

The Gem may have been safely if somewhat crudely contained, but that still left Jane, Wanda, and Howard in the mop closet of some establishment that probably belonged on an extraterrestrial *Diners Drive-Ins and Dives* with no idea how they were getting back to Earth. As obstacles went, unknown numbers of light-years were a fairly significant one.

“We could hitch-hike,” Howard suggested.

“We don't have towels,” said Jane.

“Why are towels important?” asked Wanda, puzzled. She was playing with the containment sphere, using her magic to coat it with layers of frost so it would stay cold.

“Never mind,” said Jane. “Go on, Howard.”

“There're theveral *th'patheporth* in Knowhere...” he began, only to be interrupted by a sudden chorus of shouting in the kitchen. In was in a dozen languages and an assortment of animal noises as the various aliens spoke their own tongues, but even so Jane could tell that people were upset and panicking. There were clangs and bangs as things were overturned and scattered. She glanced back at Howard and Wanda, and then reached up to very softly close the closet door.

She'd almost got it shut when it was suddenly ripped from her hands. A big scaly creature, like a humanoid lizard with black and white markings and strange silver eyes, tore the door violently off its hinges and glared down at Jane, flicking its tongue. She clutched what remained of her purse against her chest and stared back, unable to move or even to form a coherent thought. The closest thing she could come up with was *is that a Gorn?*

Fortunately, Wanda kept her head. She launched a heavy object at the creature, with all the force of her magic behind it. The lizard-man went flying backwards with a horrible shriek that sounded like bending metal, across the chaos of the kitchen, and went right through a wall to land with a splash somewhere on the other side.

Unfortunately, the object she'd thrown at it was the sphere they'd made to hold the Reality Gem.

“Get it back!” Jane shrieked. She got up, stepping on her skirts, to run after. “I hate this dress!” she declared. “I hate it! I'm never wearing a skirt, ever again! I'll pick up my next Nobel Prize in a t-shirt and jeans! They can *bury* me in my pajamas!” She pushed past the assortment of cooks and climbed up on a counter to look out through the lizard-man-shaped hole in the wall, looked down, and stopped cold.

Right outside was a basin of liquid, an unpleasant neon yellow in colour. Jane had no idea what it could be, and each possibility she could think of was more disgusting than the last. The sphere was floating on the surface. Maybe she could grab it without getting too close to the liquid. Jane reached out, hanging on to the broken wall to keep her balance.

The lizard-man's head popped up, mouth open to show double rows of sharp teeth as it gasped for air. Jane tried to straighten up again, too fast, and slipped. “Guys!” she shouted to her companions.

Wanda managed to grab her skirts and pull her back onto the counter before she could fall. Howard, meanwhile, threw himself out of the broken wall on top of the sphere. The liquid closed over him with a *gloop.*
The lizard-man crawled out onto the ground and crouched, winding up to spring back inside and
tackle them. Wanda pushed Jane aside and balled her fists. Red energy stood out around her in a
halo, and all the pots and pans in the kitchen sprang to life, flying out the broken place one by one to
pummel their attacker.

Which was all very well, except that as Jane picked herself up she saw that three or four more such
creatures were now coming in the door.

“Wanda! We have to go!” Jane said.

“Hang on to me!” Wanda grabbed Jane's arm and levitated both of them off the counter, through the
hole, and over the pit of goo.

Howard had pushed the sphere out onto the ground, and was now trying to pull himself out of the
liquid. “Ladieh!” he shouted as they passed overhead. “Hey! Ladieh!”

“I got you!” Jane reached down for him. He grabbed the sphere, which required both of his short
arms to carry, and she snagged him by the back of his collar and lifted him off his feet. “Where do
we go now?” she asked. The first lizard-man was lying upside down against a concrete wall that had
multiple cooking pots embedded in it. It was apparently unconscious.

“Go up,” Howard said. “I wath gonna tell you: there' th a thpatheport at the top of the thkull, uthed by
leth-reputable typeuth!”

“Have we been hanging out with more reputable types so far?” Jane asked. If the Collector and
Howard's friend the orange wookiee were reputable, she didn't want to meet the lower echelons.

“There' th no reputable typeuth in Knowhere,” said Howard.

Wanda lifted them higher. This attracted surprisingly little attention, as if the people around here were
used to seeing women in gowns just floating over their heads. Maybe they were – they probably saw
stranger things on a daily basis. A couple of people in the spherical flying pods honked or shouted at
them, but they made it to a catwalk dangling from the roof of the skull, and from there climbed up
into an immense open space, the size of an airport concourse and apparently of similar purpose. This
was crowded, full of people and things that were probably people coming and going, salesmen and
shops, and elevators leading up to a glass-topped hangar filled with rows of spaceships of every
possible description. It reminded Jane of Grand Central station in New York, or the terminals at
O'Hare in Chicago, though it was grubbier than either.

“How are we going to find somebody to take us to Earth?” asked Wanda, as they took all this in.
“We don't even know where Earth is.”

That required a moment's thought, but then Jane realized she knew the answer. “Yes, we do!” she
said, and pulled out her phone. The background on her lock screen was an image of the plaque
NASA had attached to the two Pioneer probes in the 70's, and part of that included the position of
the Sun relative to twelve pulsars. They made their way up the concourse until Jane found a patch of
wall that didn't have too much graffiti, and there she copied the diagram out in chalk, including the
binary codes for the distances.

“Now.” She sat down on a bench. “We just wait for somebody to notice.”

“I don't like this th,” said Howard. “It' th too obviouth.”

It was obvious – they were just sitting there out in the open, in full view of anybody who might
decide they wanted the money the Collector was offering for the return of their property. But they
could hardly ask for a ride home if they were hiding in another closet somewhere, and getting home with the Aether was their top priority right now. They had a job to do, and their own safety had to take second place.

Besides – the map would make for an interesting experiment. NASA had designed the Pioneer plaques to be a map an alien would be able to read, but at the time there hadn't been any aliens to show it to. Now would be its first real test.

A variety of creatures glanced at the map as they went by, but for nearly three hours nobody showed any particular interest. The first who actually stopped for a second look was a man – this one was recognizably man-like – with dark blue skin and very bad teeth. He stood there and took it in, then pointed to the map and said something in a language that seemed to consist mostly of vowels. The women looked at Howard for a translation.

“He thayth he came acroth thomething like that on a job onthe,” Howard said. “He picked it up and thold it for thcrap 'cauthhe that th all it wath good for.”

Jane sat up straight. The Pioneer probes had both run out of power and shut down, so nobody knew where they'd ended up, but they couldn't have gotten far outside the solar system. If this guy had encountered one... “ask him where he found it!” she told Howard. “Ask if he can take us there!”

The alien gave them an answer. “Way out on the ath-end of the galakthy,” Howard said. “He doethn't know why anybody would want to go there, but he'll take uth.” He paused, nervous. “Ath long as we can pay for it.”

Jane's heart sank. That was a problem. The most valuable thing they had was the sphere with the Aether in it, but they couldn't give that up. Jane sorted through her remaining possessions, desperately hoping to find something valuable. If the Aether hadn't made itself a new home in the diamond ring she might just have been desperate enough to trade that, but she couldn't do that now. “We've got a few of those tabs the pawnbroker gave us,” she said. “I've got my phone and my chalk... there's Darcy's Zune...” she piled the objects up.

The blue man reached down and picked up the Zune, letting it dangle by the cord for the earbuds. He asked a question.

“He wantth to know what a Zune is,” said Howard.

“Oh, it's just music from our planet,” Jane sighed. “It's got about two hundred songs on it that she thought aliens would like.”

The blue man grinned, showing off his crooked teeth. He flipped the device up in the air and caught it again.

“He thayth he'll take it,” said Howard, and stood up to shake the man's hand. “I'm Howard. Thith ith Jane Fothter and Wanda Makthimoff, Terranth.” He turned to the women. “He thayth hith name is Yondu Udonta, and he promitheth not to eat uth before we get there.”

“Oh,” said Jane. “That's... uh... very kind of him.”

Stark had said very little throughout the story, which worried Jane. What if he thought the whole thing was bullshit? Of course, it was bullshit. Jane had lived through it and she would have been the first to agree – it was one hundred percent end-to-end ridiculous bullshit, but it was bullshit that had actually happened as opposed to bullshit she'd made up. It was bullshit she needed people to believe.
A couple of times he had looked like he wanted to interrupt, but he didn't actually do so until Jane got to the bit with Yondu and the Zune. Then he held up a hand.

“Wait, wait,” Stark said. “You're telling me the aliens gave you a ride home in exchange for a mix tape?”

“I told you aliens liked mix tapes!” Darcy said proudly.

“They liilghtened to it all the way home,” Howard said. “And howled.”

“Yeah.” Jane winced at the memory. “The guy in charge hooked it up, it started playing *Living on a Prayer*, and the whole lot of them howled along like an alley full of dogs. Wanda had to 'encourage' them to knock it off.” She nodded towards the other woman – for all they'd managed to do, she'd still never been so grateful for Wanda's powers as at that moment. “So that's pretty much it – they dropped us off outside and headed home, because they pointed out there was a moon on its way to crash into us and they didn't want to hang around for that.” Jane did want to know why that was happening, but there was something else she needed answered first. “You said Thor was on Asgard. What happened there?”

Stark just shrugged.

“Nobody's quite sure,” said Eric. “Supposedly Loki was put back in prison, but then word went around that the Loki in prison was actually Odin and the Odin on the throne was actually Loki. The Loki in prison is dead now, cut down by a guard as he tried to escape – apparently. I mean, with Loki you never know,” he sighed. “The other took the Tesseract and fled. They're still sorting out the aftermath. Thor doesn't want to be king, but he's staying a while to put down the last of the unrest and make sure Baldr is secure on the throne. From the sounds of it, I'm not sure Baldr wants to be king, either.”

“Somebody's got to,” said Jane, but she couldn't help remembering Loki’s own words: *do you want to be queen of Asgard, Jane Foster?* She didn't, but it sounded like Thor might end up becoming king whether he wanted to or not. If he did... what would that mean for Jane? Considering the attitudes towards Earthlings she'd already encountered there, it didn't seem like they would want her for a queen, even if she'd been interested in becoming one.

Then again, her plans for dealing with Polyphemus would make all that irrelevant anyway, so she probably shouldn't worry about it. “What about here?” she asked. “What's with this moon everybody keeps talking about?”

“Europa,” said Stark. “Tiresias and I were trying to figure out how to blow it up when FRIDAY...”

“You can't blow up Europa!” Jane interrupted him, horrified. “It's the second most likely home for extraterrestrial life in the solar system, after Mars!”

“We don't need to worry about that. Polyphemus already ate it,” said Stark, as if that were supposed to be reassuring. An entire *moon* full of organisms, unknown and unstudied, were gone, and he thought that was supposed to make her feel better about the need to destroy their home? “Look, if we're trading stories, I better start with what happened just after you two left.”

He then told them his own version of the events of the last few weeks: Tiresias stealing the Mind Gem, then returning it after her narrow escape. The death of Pandora and the creation of Sacajawea to replace her. The plan to lure Polyphemus to Jupiter and destroy it there – and how that plan had failed.
“We were trying to brainstorm,” Stark said, “but I'm honestly not sure if there's anything left for us to try – or at least, I wasn't. Then you came back, and now... do you still have the Aether?” he asked.

Wanda unzipped a sack she was carrying and pulled out the sphere. She'd continued to keep it cold so that the Reality Gem would be contained, and it was dripping with condensed moisture. Stark's eyes lit up when he saw it, but not in a way that suggested greed or lust for power, as Loki's might have. Instead, they were bright with rekindled hope. Seeing that in Stark of all people made a lump in Jane's throat.

“I played with it while we were on our way home,” she said. “I thought if we tried to hide it, the aliens would want to know what it was. If they thought it was just a toy, they wouldn't be interested.”

“And it worked,” Jane said. Wanda had been proud of her ruse – but now they were stalling. They'd been stalling ever since Jane stopped to ask what was going on in Asgard. None of this was anything they really needed to know in order to save the world. They only information they actually required was where to find Polyphemus... or was it? All right?” Jane said, looking at Stark and Eric. “Is there anything else we need to know before I try this? Anything at all?” All their problems in this mess had stemmed from not having enough information. If Jane were going to do this, she would do it with as many facts as were available.

“Is the Vision still at Jupiter?” Wanda wanted to know.

“He's following Polyphemus, at a safe distance,” Stark said. “If we warn him we're about to try something, he'll get out of the way.”

“Good.” Jane nodded. It was time to get down to business. During their journey in the hold of Yondu's ship, she'd thought out exactly how she would get this done. “I think it's best if we go somewhere high up. That way if anything goes wrong, there won't be too many people near where it's happening.” She looked at Stark, suspecting he wasn't going to like this part. “So I figured...”

“Let me guess.” Stark sighed. “Avengers Tower. Fine. It's had the top blown off it once already. Pepper will enjoy getting to redecorate again.”

Jane hadn't expected him to agree so readily, but she wouldn't argue. “Great! All we need now is a car.”

“No, a car won't do it,” said Eric.

“It won't?” asked Jane. “You said Europa was still a day or so away.”

“It's not about time,” Stark said. “There's a lot of things you can keep secret from the public, but a moon the size of ours on its way to slam into us, that isn't one of them.”

Jane paused as the implications sank in. She remembered the demonstrations outside the UN and in Times Square... how much worse was it now?

FRIDAY had the answer for them in the form of news footage: Grand Central Station, the Grand Hyatt, and Park Avenue for blocks around were so full of protestors that traffic could not pass. Some people were literally camped out with tents and stoves. Both the police and the military were present to keep things from getting rowdy, and were not always succeeding. Windows were broken and shops had been emptied, cars destroyed and monuments vandalized. Hand-made signs and graffiti on the walls proclaimed that it was the end of the world and the Avengers were at fault – again.

“We've been kind of hiding out,” Stark admitted, as Jane and Wanda watched the footage on the
holoscreens. “Which is embarrassing, I have to admit. Last time the Avengers had to hide, at least it was from a killer robot.”

“We'll have to fly in,” said Wanda. “We'll take the quinjet. Will you pilot it, Stark?”

Stark stood up. “Give me twenty minutes to prep.”

There was no argument at all, not even a token one. Jane had not expected Stark to come right out and say I was wrong and you were right. He just wasn't that type, but this instant agreement was almost the same thing. It allowed her a moment of quiet triumph – and then the truth hit her.

Somehow, Jane hadn't yet actually digested the idea that she was really about to do this. This awful thing that she'd begged Stark and Thor to let her try, that Eric had forbidden her from doing, and yet she knew needed to be done. Jane Foster was going to die saving the world.

She was not okay with that. Jane had a lot to live for. She had friends, family, and a career. She had all the secrets of the universe that she'd always been so eager to learn, nieces and nephews to spoil, six more realms to visit... and she never would. As of the moment she'd made up her mind to do this, Jane Foster no longer had a future. She'd hoped that when push came to shove she'd be willing to accept that, but she wasn't. Something selfish and desperate inside her wanted to live, and was furious at the horrible unfairness of the situation. Why couldn't she save the world and survive? But the coldly logical part, the scientist who collected facts and figures and added them up into theories and proofs, knew that this was the way it had to be.

She hugged Eric first, squeezing him as tight as she could and burying her face in his shoulder in case she started to cry – which she was determined not to do. “I'll miss you so much,” she said, as he rocked her gently back and forth. “Thank you, Eric. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for everything.” Even when he'd misinterpreted what she'd said and put her on suicide watch, he'd only done it because he loved her.

“You're welcome, Jane,” Eric replied. “Your Dad would be proud of you. I know he would.”

Jane nodded. She had to swallow hard to keep the tears down as she turned to Darcy. “Thanks for putting up with me,” she said, hugging her friend.

“You were awesome to put up with,” Darcy told her. “I met gods, I fought elves, I gave a mix tape to aliens! Best internship ever!”

Jane rubbed Darcy's back. “Tell Thor... tell him I'm sorry, but I had to.”

“I think he'll get it,” Darcy assured her. “Thor's a big-picture kind of guy.”

Jane straightened up again, wiping her eyes on her arm. “Tell my sister I love her, and I'm sorry I won't be there for Rosh Hashanah,” she added. “In the Canaries... I wish I'd gone to see the crater with you.”

“It's okay,” Darcy said with a shrug. “I mean, it was just a big hole in the ground.”

Nobody said goodbye. They all meant goodbye, but nobody wanted to say it.

Jane managed to keep the tears in as she hugged everybody one more time, and kept strict control of herself while she and Wanda waved to Eric, Darcy, Howard, and an assortment of Avengers as they boarded the quinjet. It was only when they were belted in and taking off that Jane's emotions finally overflowed. She bent over, put her face in her hands, and bawled.
Wanda got up and put her arms around Jane, rubbing her shoulder and murmuring words into her hair in a language Jane didn't speak. The words themselves didn't matter anyway, only the sympathy behind them. Jane reached up to grip one of Wanda's arms in both hands and accepted the embrace, weeping until her head hurt and she didn't have any tears left. It wasn't fair. *It wasn't fair.*

Why had she avoided Wanda for those first few weeks? Oh, right – it was to spite the idiot who thought they'd be best friends just because they were both Jewish. What a stupid reason to think two people would automatically get along. And what a stupid, *stupid* reason to refuse to.

“You can still change your mind,” Stark said from up front.

Jane blew her nose on the hem of her skirt. She had no kleenex, and didn't care what happened to this ridiculous dress anyway. “No, I can't,” she said, shaking her head.

There was a short silence, and Stark said, “I know.”

The helipad at the top of Avengers Tower was icy cold, with a ferocious wind that roared in Jane's ears and tore her tears from her cheeks. It almost drowned out the sounds of Manhattan drifting up from below – honking horns, police sirens, and the faint rustle of millions of shouting voices all seemed like things happening miles away. Stark hovered while Jane and Wanda dropped to the helipad, then looked down from the hatch and asked, “you need me for anything more?”

“Hell, no!” Jane replied, shouting to be heard over the wind and the rumbling repulsor engines. “Get as far away as you can!”

“Got it!” He started to close the hatch, then paused. “Hey, Dr. Foster?”

“Yeah?” she asked, grabbing at her hair with both hands to keep it out of her face. What did he feel like he had to say to her? Was he going to apologize? Offer advice? Jane couldn't imagine.

But after a moment, Stark just shook his head. “Forget it. Good luck!”

“Thanks!”

The hatch ground shut, and the quinjet flew away over the city. Jane's legs were trembling as she walked to the middle of the helipad and looked up at the sky. It was a clear day, and the half moon was easy to spot, floating tranquilly between wisps of cloud. The familiar shapes of the *maria* told Jane that this was the Moon, Earth's familiar Moon that wouldn't be doing them any harm. Above it and a little to the right, however, was another half-moon, much smaller but extraordinarily bright. The surface of Europa was ice, much more reflective than the Moon's volcanic rocks. At this distance, it was impossible to miss. The Avengers hadn't been able to hide the threat, because everybody in the world could see it coming.

“Ready?” she asked Wanda.

“Ready!” Wanda replied.

Jane held up the sphere in both hands, and at a gesture from Wanda the other layer peeled away like the rind of an orange. Slushy brine spilled out to splatter on the helipad at Jane's feet. In the middle was the smaller sphere, still cold enough to keep the Reality Gem suspended. It split in half, and there was the glowing pear-shaped stone. All that power, locked up in that one tiny space, mathematically similar to a black hole and yet qualitatively different in a way human science could barely cope with... just waiting for some fool to try to use it.

Jane was breathing hard as she put out her hand. Wanda floated the stone into her palm, and dropped
The sensation was immediately familiar. Icy cold tendrils of something rushed into Jane and wrapped around her bones, insinuated itself into her organs, and began tearing her apart from within. The Aether had consumed her slowly, as Malekith had designed it to do, but this was fast. Pain rippled through her as she felt her insides start to turn to jelly, and she wondered if this was what it felt like to die of Ebola.

“No!” she said firmly, tightening her fingers on the stone. “You know me! You remember me!”

But the Gem, in turn, tightened its grip on her. The last thing she saw as her vision blanked out red was Wanda reaching out with her magic, trying to take the stone from her hand again. It was no good. Jane couldn't open her fingers. She was lifted off her feet and a shock wave spread outwards from her body. The helipad rippled, windows shattered, and Wanda was thrown right off the edge of the building and sent plummeting towards Park Avenue.

“No!” Jane repeated. “I will not die for nothing!”

It's not so bad.

That was what Tony had wanted to tell Dr. Foster, before he'd chickened out. It wasn't so bad, that moment when you finally accepted that you were about to die. It was actually kind of peaceful. You realized that there was nothing you could do about it, and then you just closed your eyes and dropped into the darkness. Tony could remember that moment, falling out of the sky towards a wormhole rapidly closing beneath him, as one of perfect clarity and oddly, of perfect rest. Tony Stark was a fidgety person by nature. He rarely slowed down, even in his sleep. That instant of looking death in the face and finding her wasn't afraid of it after all, that might have been the first and last time in his life that he'd ever come to a complete stop. It was practically transcendent.

He hadn't told her. Why hadn't he told her?

It was because he didn't want to seem weak, he decided. He didn't want to admit that in order to reach that moment of serenity in the face of death, even Iron Man had to go through the bits when he was terrified of it. It was like the time he'd been up late at night working on routines for Sacajawea, and had figured out why he was still helping Tiresias despite her lying to him over and over.

“I shouldn't be so upset,” Tiresias had said mournfully. “Pandora was only a machine.”

The statement had tugged at Tony's heartstrings, and he'd wanted to remind her that machines was all any of them were: infinitely complicated chemical Von Neumann machines. Pandora hadn't been 'only' a machine, she'd been everything Tiresias had ever put into her and more. She'd been a friend, a companion, a psychologist, a daughter, and Tiresias had every right to miss her, every right to feel robbed and to think that she would burn the world to the ground in order to have her back. He'd wanted to say all that, but he hadn't, because he would have had to admit the gaping hole in his heart left by the loss of JARVIS, and he still couldn't do that. Not even to himself.

Shock wave incoming, said FRIDAY.

Tony snapped back to the present and looked at the rear view display. The shock was visible as a circle of distorted air moving outwards from the top of the tower, like a bubble expanding at the speed of sound. In the sunshine he could see windows shattering and lights going out, and tiny shape thrown off the top of the building. When FRIDAY zoomed in on this, he could see it was a woman in a long dress.
“Shit,” said Tony. He brought the quinjet around as hard as he could. Dr. Foster had told him to stay away, but if that were her or Wanda, he wasn't going to let her splatter on the street. Even as the jet turned, however, he already knew that he'd never make it. By the time he got back to her, she'd already have hit the ground. There was no way...

A web of red energy crackled into place around the woman, slowing her fall and suspending her in the air. That must mean it was Wanda – and sure enough, as Tony got closer he could see her, floating in a bubble of zero gravity with her hair and skirts drifting around her. He brought the jet to a hover above her and opened the hatch.

“All aboard!” he shouted.

Wanda threw herself in, making a very ungraceful landing. Maybe the Vision could give her some flying lessons, Tony thought as he closed the hatch again. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” She came to sit next to him in the co-pilot's seat. “We can't leave. The Aether is killing her!”

“We can't do anything about that now,” said Tony, though he hated himself for it. Dr. Foster had known this would happen and had gone to do it anyway because she thought it was their only hope – and Tony had already agreed to let her do it. He had no more power to save her than anyone on Earth had to save him once he'd flown into that wormhole. All they could do was get away from here and hope her plan worked.

Something above them exploded. Tony quickly applied forward thrust as the giant A on the side of the Tower fell, missing them by only a couple of yards. A moment later he had to swerve to avoid taking the top off the Chrysler Building, too, but then he managed to get control of the aircraft and headed out over the Upper Bay.

“Hey, Vision,” he said – following Europa had brought the android back within radio range of Earth, with replies taking only a few seconds to come back. “Sorry for getting out of touch, it's been a little busy down here. I've got Wanda on board and Dr. Foster's on the roof of the Tower with the Aether. Beyond that, I have no idea what's going on.”

Wanda? the Vision asked. Wanda is with you?

“I'm here,” she confirmed, reaching for the radio speaker as if to touch him. “I'm here, I'm safe. We got the Aether.”

“Can you see anything from where you are?” asked Tony.

There was a short pause. As a matter of fact, I can.
The world had descended into blackness that was gnawing painfully at the edges of Jane's consciousness. She could feel it trying to get in, and knew she had to keep it out somehow. If she let this thing eat her, the entire last couple of weeks would have been pointless. She and Wanda would have caused a civil war in Asgard and become wanted criminals in a floating skull in space, all for nothing. She refused to let that happen. Jane had never intended that her life be meaningless. She certainly wasn't going to let her death be.

Even when she was a child, Jane had always wanted to be a part of something bigger. While her sister Kelly planted a garden and collected a menagerie of pets, Jane had already been looking at the stars. She'd wanted to learn everything there was to know, to see further out in space and back in time than anyone ever had, to learn what made the universe tick. What she'd seen from Earth and Asgard had only been baby steps in that grandest of all possible adventures, and if that was where it stopped... find, but she would not let the Reality Gem win before she mastered it.

Do or do not, there is no try. Jane wasn't trying. She would wield the gem against Polyphemus. She just had to show it who was boss.

The pain got worse as the Gem's grip on her tightened, as a reddish-black whirlwind like a tiny tornado surrounded her body and lifted her off her feet. Jane gritted her teeth and focused on her vision on Asgard, the moment when she thought she'd been most in tune with the Aether. At that time it had put her in touch with the mind of Malekith, urging her to destroy. Now Malekith was dead, and there was only Jane and the Stone that was devouring her. She could imagine that same black sky hanging over Manhattan...

And then suddenly, it happened: rather than the pain consuming her, she consumed it, and Jane opened her eyes.

Or did she? She wasn't quite sure, but she could see again – she seemed to be floating high above the ground, with the city spread out below her like a map. There was the quinjet, impossibly tiny, moving in to catch Wanda as she fell. The crowd of protestors blocking Park Avenue looked like brightly-dressed ants, and yet Jane found that if she wanted to she could look closer and pick out individual faces, or read the print on the newspaper one woman was holding. It was fascinating, like a first look through a microscope, but then she realized that the paper's front page article was about Europa heading for Earth. That brought her back to what she was doing. She couldn't get distracted now. She had to look up.

There it was, that second moon. This time, Jane was sure she did not do anything physical – she just raised her attention to the brilliant alien half-moon hanging above the familiar one, and immediately she was there.

Jane had seen Europa in pictures. It always looked sort of like a banged-up old ivory cue ball rolling through space, smooth except where Jupiter's enormous gravity had cracked its surface open, like squeezing an orange until the peel split. It looked very much the same now as it had to Voyager or Galileo, but there was a far more immediate sense of its size as it hurtled through the heavens. If set down on Earth, Europa would have the diameter of Antarctica.

The other difference was that photographs had always made the cracks in the surface look rusty brown, but now they were black. There'd been living things in that ice, mobile and sensate. Polyphemus had sucked up their rudimentary minds and killed them all, and without them, the rest of the moon's hidden ecosystem was swiftly dying, too.
Jane's jaw clenched, at least metaphorically. What did Polyphemus think gave it the right to do such a thing? What did it want, besides to destroy every living thing it could find out of sheer jealousy that other beings felt their tiny lives had meaning while Polyphemus knew its own vast intellect did not? What did it plan to do once it had extinguished every mind in the universe? Would it simply settle down somewhere to stew in its own bitterness?

Then she discovered that Polyphemus could hear her. She hadn't even been speaking aloud, just wondering to herself, but it had heard her and it had the nerve to be offended by what it had heard.

*How dare I?* it asked. *How dare you, tiny thing, presume to know what I am thinking? I am the greatest mind in the cosmos. You say you want to be part of something bigger. I am the biggest thing there is. Someday I shall consume the universe and then re-make it according to my own will – and you, insect, will give me the power to do that. You have an Infinity Stone.*

These ideas were not spoken aloud in so many words, but the ideas intruded on Jane's own consciousness as if echoing in her skull and rattling her bones, and she was for a moment puzzled by their meaning. She had an Infinity Stone, yes, but it was the Reality Gem. Polyphemus was entangled with a different Gem.

*Any Stone ought to do,* said Polyphemus. *I need only figure out how to master it.*

The surface of Europa opened. The actual crust of the moon remained unbroken, of course, but space warped as if a giant sinkhole opened in the crust, and white tendrils snaked out to wrap themselves around Jane.

What her reaction to this would have been ten minutes earlier, Jane didn't know – but in that moment, she wanted to laugh. For something that put on such airs, Polyphemus was so tiny! She swatted the tentacles away like mosquitoes, and they recoiled in surprise. An exclamation of surprise and pain impinged on her awareness in the same nonphysical way as the previous words. Polyphemus had been expecting the Aether to be something it could just insinuate itself into, as it had with the Mind Gem. Its calculations hadn't told it that it could be shut out like that, and it began going back over its math, trying to figure out what it had done wrong. It found nothing. The Infinity Gems were singularities... surely all singularities were identical!

For perhaps the first time since its creation, Polyphemus was afraid. For the first time it found itself confronted with a power greater than itself. The tentacles shrank back, and the surface of Europa closed around it.

*Oh, no, you don't!*

Jane hammered on the surface of the moon. No hand came down – the Reality Gem had torn her body apart, she realized, and in the moment she was, to her own surprise, not really bothered by that – but the ice cracked and split. Water gushed up, quickly freezing as it met the cold of space, but of course there was no sign of Polyphemus. It wasn't under the water or in the centre of the rock. It was folded away in a pocket of space that no outside force could access.

*Tiny thing!* it jeered. *Even with all that power at your disposal, you cannot touch me! What a view you will have, you and the bearer of the Mind Gem both, as you watch your world shattered!*

Jane was about to strike the surface of Europa gain – even if she couldn't reach Polyphemus, she could break the moon into bits too small to be dangerous and send them hurtling back into space. At the last second, however, she stopped herself, because it occurred to her that she *did* know a way into spaces that were inaccessible. Odin had taught her to create a short-range artificial wormhole that connected a pocket in space with the larger, normal space around it. That was exactly what the
hidden dungeon in Asgard had been. She only needed something to draw with.

Chalk wouldn't do, not on a canvas as large as the surface of a moon, but Europa itself provided the materials. The Gem's power reached out and dug into the icy crust. First it repaired the damage Jane's blow had done, and then began rearranging the dark material in the cracks into circles and runes. There were no clumsy approximations here. With her mind augmented by the Infinity Stone, Jane knew exactly what each shape, each corner, had to look like, and it all made perfect sense in a way her mortal mind could not have begun to comprehend. Within seconds, the surface of Europa bore not random scars from tidal flexing but a gigantic magic circle, and Jane reached through and caught hold of Polyphemus.

It was surprisingly fast. She grabbed and squeezed, and with a cry of surprise and rage, the crystal matrix splintered. The white liquid dispersed into the countless trillions of nanomachines that made it up. These tried to scatter, but Jane caught each one and crushed it to atoms. Within seconds, it was over. The chorus of angry voices faded to a whisper, and then melted away into the bottomless silence of space.

Then, and only then, did Jane feel the sea of oily black pain well up to drown her again. She tried to swim, but she didn't have a body anymore – it was just her mind and the Infinity Stone, hanging in a void millions of miles from Earth. Sheer determination had kept her on top so far, but now that she'd done what she'd come to do, she was starting to sink. If she'd had a head, it would have been pounding. If she'd had lungs, her breathing would have been shallow and weak.

But she realized there was one more thing she needed to do. If Jane left Europa where it was, even without Polyphemus inside it, its trajectory would still send it smashing into Earth. She threw all her remaining strength against it, and it went spinning back out into the solar system. What would the astronomy textbooks of the future say, she wondered, to explain why Jupiter had once had four large moons, and now had only three?

Her vision went red. It washed across the stars, extinguishing them by threes and fours. When she turned back to look at Earth and the Moon, she saw only pinkish specks that were slowly smearing out of focus to merge with the darkness around them. They were safe now, though. There wouldn't be any impact, and there wouldn't be any Polyphemus consuming the minds of the creatures who lived there. Her job was done... and she could go now.

Red darkness welled up, thick and heavy and ice-cold. And if Stark had managed to say that last thing he'd wanted to say to her, she would have now agreed with him. It wasn't that bad at all.

Jane expected it to end there. Curiously, it did not.

Instead of slipping into nothingness, Jane became aware that she was not alone. There were other... she didn't want to say people, but there were definitely other presences here, and some of them were weirdly familiar. She struggled for a way to understand what she was perceiving. Information didn't seem to be coming in through the normal sensory channels. Maybe what she needed was a metaphor, a place in which she could imagine herself. She thought of the Astrolabe room on Asgard...

Suddenly, there she was, surrounded by tall, carved granite columns, with the simulated galaxies hovering in the dome over her head. Jane didn't really feel physical again, but she definitely had the mental picture of herself, in her jeans and wolf shirt and a blanket scarf, standing there looking up at the projections. And sure enough, there were other people in the room. Some of them looked human. Others... not so much.

There was a spindly-limbed, black-eyed creature that Jane's inner nerd would have immediately
identified as an Asgard were it not for later life experiences. Another was a stately being at least eight feet tall, with translucent flesh shivering with bioluminescence, as if the entity were some kind of humanoid squid. A third figure, sulking in a corner, was familiar indeed – ashen-faced, white-haired, and point-eared, it could only be a younger, not-yet-scarred version of Malekith.

The one who stepped up to greet her looked human in the same sort of way that Asgardians looked human, in that he was humanoid but far more beautiful than any inhabitant of the Earth. He had long strawberry-blond hair and a neatly-trimmed beard, a hooked nose and a helmet with two curling horns on it. His armor was charcoal-coloured leather, decorated with entwined gold and silver wires, and Jane realized where she'd seen him before. He'd been in the book Odin had shown her.

“So you are Jane Foster,” he said.

“You're Thor's grandfather!” she exclaimed at the same time.

King Bor nodded gravely. “That I am. Like you, I became entangled with the Aether, and like you, I failed in the end to keep my hand from it. I thought I could wield it to do good, but my will was not strong enough. It consumed me, and the throne fell to Odin.”

“That is what we all tried to do,” the tall squid creature said. Its voice was female, with a weird vibrato. “And now all of us are here.”

“We're... we're inside the Reality Gem,” Jane realized. She looked around, as if thinking she'd see some sign of it, but there was only the space she'd imagined, the Astrolabe with its dark tapestries blocking out the external light. For a moment she wondered what she would find if she tried to go outside, then realized it would be exactly what she expected to find. All of this existed only in her mind. “We're all part of it.” Stuck in this limbo for the rest of all eternity.

“I'm afraid so,” said the squid creature. “It's not as terrible as you're thinking – in a few centuries you'll start to lose your individual identity, and then you won't care anymore.”

“That's not reassuring!” Jane protested.

“No, it is,” said King Bor. “Because as long as we're in here, our will still has power over the stone. Malekith preserved you for thirty hours while you were host to the Aether, but I helped you to maintain control, because I owed him his destruction.” He looked over his shoulder at the elf, who did not move from his seat in the corner. “Now the two of us are trapped in each other's company for the rest of time, and will eventually merge into a single being. We both agree, it seems fitting.”

“Did you help me with Polyphemus, too?” asked Jane. She felt a little disappointed. She'd wanted to think it was something in her that made her capable of what she'd just done, but this did seem far more realistic. The Vision had been both right and wrong – the Stones themselves did not want things, but the people permanently entangled with them did.

“We did,” King Bor said. “We felt you deserved it – you weren't like us. We all wanted power for ourselves, even if we sought to do good with it. All you wanted was to save your world, and you knew you would die doing it. You asked nothing for yourself.” He put a hand on Jane's shoulder. “And now that we have helped you, I would like you to help me.”

Jane supposed she couldn't deny him that, as long as he didn't want help destroying the universe or something... but what could she possibly do for him while they were both in here? “I'll try,” she said. She was no longer aware of the outside universe, but maybe that was just a matter of will. “What do you want?”
“I want Thor's happiness,” was the reply. “He will have little enough.”

The top of Avengers Tower was in ruins, but that was nothing new – one of the reasons they'd moved after Ultron was because the Tower was too damned obvious a target and too hard to fix when it got wrecked. Cubes of shattered safety glass were scattered across the helipad, and through the windows Tony could see the penthouse furniture overturned and papers blowing around in the high-altitude wind.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find on the helipad itself – but he landed to find Dr. Foster lying not far away, face-down and unmoving among the wreckage.

Tony hung back. He wanted to go check on her and yet he didn't, because he knew he would find her dead. What was he going to say to Thor? Thor would probably understand the necessity of it, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be absolutely crushed. He might be a towering slab of blond beef with god-like superpowers, but Thor seemed to have a difficult time holding on to the people he loved. After losing his brother and now probably both parents, having to lose Dr. Foster too just seemed cruel.

Wanda, however, did not hesitate at all. She ran to kneel next to Dr. Foster and began shaking her. “Jane!” she said. “Jane!”

That was when Tony first realized that Dr. Foster's clothes had changed. When he'd dropped her off, she'd been wearing the dark blue gown she'd come back from Asgard in – Wanda was still dressed in a cherry red one. The body on the roof was in blue jeans and a black t-shirt, with a khaki vest and fringed boots. When had that happened?

“Jane!” Wanda insisted, and to Tony's absolute astonishment, Dr. Foster sat up, pushing her hair out of her face. She looked entirely whole and healthy, and she stared down at herself for a moment, then up at the sky where Europa already looked smaller, and then turned her head to blink in confusion at Wanda.

Wanda threw her arms around Dr. Foster in a big hug. “You're all right!” she exclaimed, overjoyed.

“No!” Dr. Foster pushed her away, then looked down at her own hands in apparent shock. “No, no, I'm not all right. This... this isn't me.”

“What do you mean, it's not you?” Wanda asked. “I can feel your mind.” She reached to touch Dr. Foster's temple. “I know it's you.”

“It's not me.” Dr. Foster caught her hand and pushed it back. “It's... it's a copy of me.” She looked to Tony, her eyes searching for understanding, but he didn't even begin to know what she was talking about. All he could think of was that they all needed to get off the top of the building, before any unnoticed structural damage reared its ugly head. He went to help Wanda get Dr. Foster to her feet.

“You're gonna be okay,” Tony told her.

“No, I'm not okay!” she insisted, although as far as Tony could tell she didn't have so much as a bruise. “Listen, when somebody gets killed by contact with an Infinity Stone, apparently it's a lot like what Polyphemus did. It absorbs you and you become part of it. There were other people in there who'd tried to use the Gem to get power for themselves. They helped me fight Polyphemus, but then King Bor – he's Thor's grandfather – he said he wanted Thor to be happy...”

“Seat belts,” said Tony, as they got her settled in the quinjet. He didn't know whether to listen to Dr. Foster or not. She sounded desperate to get her point across, but for all he knew she was just
babbling after the Infinity Stone had driven her off the deep end. Wanda did up her belt for her, while Tony strapped himself back into the pilot's seat.

“So they made a copy of me,” Jane went on, “out of matter that had never interacted with the Aether, so I wouldn't have to worry about the entanglement anymore.” She was running her hands over her arms and shoulders, as if to make sure everything was still there. “Jane Foster is dead, and I'm... I don't know what I am, but I know I'm not Jane Foster, because she was okay with this duplicating herself thing, and I'm not!”

The recent past had been full of moments when Tony had known exactly what he needed to say and regretted not saying it. As he took off from the helipad again, he thought that at least this wasn't going to be another one of those moments, because he had no idea what he could say about this. What would he want somebody to say to him, if he woke up one morning and realized he was just a copy of the real Tony Stark?

“What am I going to say to Thor?” Jane asked. “He'll be so happy to see me, and then...”


“Jane,” said Wanda, before Tony could continue. “Do you remember when you got your first telescope? It was a Christmas gift. You were seven years old.” When Tony glanced back, he could see Jane's eyes light up red for a moment, as Wanda dug into her memories. “You insisted on setting it up right away so you could use it that night, even though there were record cold temperatures that year, and you saw the moons of Jupiter for the first time.”

“Yeah...” said Jane slowly, and Tony began to think maybe she wouldn't need his idea.

“It's our memories that make us who we are,” Wanda told her. “If you remember that, then you're still Jane Foster.”

“It's not the same,” Jane insisted. So Tony played his card. “Quasi-set theory,” he repeated. “All subatomic particles are identical, right? Every up quark is exactly the same as every other up quark, and the same is true of downs and electrons and all the other little particles. If I had an electron in my right hand and one in my left, and they had the same spin, absolutely nothing would change if they switched places, right?”

“Of course,” said Jane. “Subatomic particles have no dimensions, so they can't have any features.”

“Correct,” said Tony. “So if every quark is identical, then so is every proton and neutron. If those are all identical, then every carbon atom is identical to every other carbon atom. And if you're made of identical atoms and have identical memories and taste in t-shirts, then the laws of physics state that there's no way to tell you aren't Jane Foster, so you might as well be. Like I said — quasi-set theory!” He was very pleased with this line of reasoning. That was what he would have wanted to be told in the same situation: that even if he wasn't the original, it simply didn't matter.

But she still wanted to argue with him. “That doesn't work,” Jane said, shaking her head. “Because my particles are different – I'm not entangled with the Reality Gem. There's no way to break quantum entanglement, even the Asgardians and the Brisings can't do it. They had to rebuild me molecule by molecule.”

“Identical molecule by molecule,” Tony pointed out.
“And isn't that a good thing anyway?” Wanda asked.

“Maybe.” Jane tugged uncomfortably at her shirt. “I just don't think it's me.”

Tony turned back to the controls. He should probably focus on what he was good at, which clearly wasn't reassuring people... but a couple of seconds later he had another idea. “You said you weren't okay with being duplicated,” he said, “but she was okay with duplicating herself. Is that really something you think Jane Foster would do? Because if it's not,” he added, “then it's her who's not the real one. She's just a part of the Aether. You're Jane Foster.”

“I...” she began, then just sat back in her seat, shaking her head. “I don't know. I really don't.”

That was better than nothing, Tony supposed. Maybe Thor would be able to help her with this, or maybe they could get her to see a therapist or something. He was just glad that even if he hadn't made it any better, he'd at least managed not to make it worse.

Tony tapped the radio. “How’s it look, Vizh?” he asked.

Europa is still moving away from the Earth, the android confirmed. Its current trajectory will take it past Jupiter again, but my calculations suggest that the planet will not be able to recapture it. Instead it will be flung out of the solar system into interstellar space.

“Sorry about that,” Jane murmured.

“I should hope you are,” said Tony. “In case I need to repeat it, that was my favourite moon. I think Pluto should be allowed to be a planet again, just to make me feel better.”

Is Wanda safe? the Vision asked.

“She is,”’s aid Tony, “and so is Dr. Foster, sort of. We're still working that part out. When are you expecting to be back on the ground?”

Tomorrow morning, I hope, the Vision said. While I am in transit, I think we had better start thinking about our next problem.

For a moment Tony couldn't remember what the Vision was talking about, then he slumped a little as he remembered the hundred and one other things they'd been too busy to deal with. “Oh, right,” he said. “No rest for the wicked around here.”

“We have another problem?” Jane asked.

“Of course we do,” said Tony. “You didn't think the universe was going to cut us a break, did you?”

The Vision explained. Brisingr's closest approach to Earth is in less than three weeks, and while the world has been panicking about the impending collision with Europa, the United Nations has decided to prioritize and finally reach a decision regarding the Brisingers' claim to Venus.

Tony was downright proud of the sarcasm in the word prioritize. That was JARVIS talking, right there.

“Oh, no,” groaned Jane.

They have decided not to let the Brisingers settle, the Vision said. They are planning to destroy the vessels as they pass Earth.
There probably wasn't anything the Vision could have said that would have made Jane, or the copy of her, or whatever she was, feel worse. She could have done something about that if she'd still had the Infinity Stone... she could have created a new planet for them at Alpha Centauri or something... a place where they could settle down, humans couldn't stop them, and everybody would still be able to talk to each other. Or she could have restored their home in Andromeda. Or something... she had no idea what she would really have been capable of with the Stone in hand and maybe that was a good thing. But she'd been so focused on saving her own world, why couldn't she have thought of anyone else's?

As she stared out the window at the countryside rolling by and stewed in all this, Stark suddenly turned in the pilot's seat and asked, “what happened to the Aether?”

Jane blinked and looked down at her hands again, half-expecting to find herself still holding it, but of course she was not. “I... don't know,” she said. The last time she remembered being aware of the outside world, she'd been floating in space somewhere, looking at a Europa that seemed no bigger than one of those inflatable yoga balls. For all she knew, the Reality Gem was still up there. Maybe it was embedded in the ice where she'd last touched it as she'd pushed the moon on its way.

Stark considered that. “Probably all for the best,” he decided.

“I'm sorry about your mother's ring,” Jane added. She might have already said that, but she couldn't remember. “If you want to keep the Quantum Pot, I guess it's yours.” That would be awkward to explain to Thor, but a promise was a promise.

Stark grimaced. “It was just a rock,” he said, although his voice was pained. A moment later, however, she realized that the pain wasn't about the ring, when he said, “I've lost more precious things while trying to save the world.”

What was he talking about? Jane looked at Wanda, to see if she knew.

“JARVIS,” said Wanda quietly. “His computer.”

“Get out of my head, Maximoff,” Stark growled, but then he sighed. “Yeah, I guess I'm gonna have to actually talk to the Vision about that one of these days, aren't I?”

“It might help,” Wanda offered. “Do you want me to...”

“No,” he cut her off. “No, I'll do it myself. When he gets back to Earth. Hold me to that, okay?”

“I will,” said Wanda, and Jane couldn't tell if it were a threat or a promise.

When they landed in the hangar at Avengers HQ, Darcy and Eric were there waiting for them. Darcy had been sitting on the floor next to the door, resting her arms on her knees and looking generally miserable – Eric leaning on the wall next to her with an empty coffee mug in his hands. The way they looked up when the ramp lowered and people began coming down made it clear that they expected bad news. So when a facsimile of Jane stepped out, whole and healthy and in her own damned clothes, they were first shocked, and then delighted.

“Jane!” Eric exclaimed, dropping his cup in surprise. Like the others at the compound, it bounced.

“Jane!” squealed Darcy in the same moment. She scrambled to her feet at the same time as she lunged forward, almost on all fours as she threw herself on top of Jane and gave her a hug that felt as if it would leave bruised ribs. “Oh, my god, you're okay! You did all that tell Thor I'm sorry and I was sure you were a goner!”
I was,” said Jane.

“But you're all right now!” Eric said, and wrapped his arms around both women.

“I am,” Jane agreed. For a moment she considered just not telling them... but she had to. It would have been a lie not to. “I'm all right, but I'm not really Jane Foster.”

Darcy and Eric both drew back in surprise, but after a few confused moments, Darcy laughed aloud.

“Why are you laughing?” Jane asked, confused and a little offended. It hadn't been a joke.

“That's the end of Howard the Duck!” Darcy said. “When he goes, I am not Howard anymore! in the deep voice, and then he says ha, fooled you!” She grinned, but then it slowly faded away as she saw Jane's serious expression. “You're... how are you not Jane?” she asked. Her arms fell to her sides as she stepped back, frightened now. Eric put his hands on her shoulders.

That hurt, to see the two of them afraid of her. “I...” Jane licked her lips. “Let's sit down, and I'll explain.”
Be Jane Foster

This time, there was no big group of Avengers gathered around as Jane sat down in the kitchen with a mug of tea. The superheroes were in the console room, discussing the UN's verdict on Brisingr. Jane wanted to be involved in dealing with that, too, but for now this seemed a little more important. She described, in the metaphorical terms that were the only way she really could describe it, what she'd seen inside the Reality Gem, and how King Bor had insisted on remaking her.

“So the real Jane Foster, the original one, she's still in there,” Jane finished, her voice heavy. It was terrible news to have to deliver – sorry, your friend is dead, I'm your consolation prize. “Inside the Stone for the rest of time, until her consciousness merges with the rest of the people in there. I'm a copy. Stark tried to explain to me why it doesn't matter, but it matters to me. And you know what the really annoying thing is?”

Darcy frowned. “The annoying thing about coming back from the dead?” she asked.

“I didn't die,” Jane corrected her. “Actually, I think I kind of became immortal. Sort of. But yes. The annoying thing is that King Bor didn't want to make me because he thought I was important. He just wanted to do it because he said he wanted Thor to be happy!” She shook her head. “That's such a stupid reason! Is that all I'm good for, even when I just saved the planet? Just somebody... someplace for Thor to put his hammer?!”

“Jane!” Eric exclaimed, shocked by her uncharacteristic vulgarity.

“You said the other you agreed with it, though,” Darcy pointed out. “I mean, you didn't exactly say, but she must have or you wouldn't be here, right? So why did she agree?”

“I don't know. That's where my memories end,” Jane said. The next thing she'd been aware of, after Bor had said I want Thor's happiness, was... was coming together. Bor and her other self had built her up, molecule by molecule, from traces of matter all over the city. A flake of rust from the bumper of a taxi provided iron for her blood; a feather shed by a pigeon gave them keratin for her hair; a bit of chalk where a child had been drawing on the sidewalk made calcium for her bones. It had happened with dizzying speed and then she'd been lying there whole on the helipad, just in time for Stark and Wanda to find her.

“Well, if somebody asked you to do that, why would you do it?” asked Eric.

“I wouldn't,” Jane insisted. “I wouldn't create a doppelgänger to take over my life! But...” she paused a moment, chewing on her lip as she considered it. “I guess if I had to, I'd tell myself that at least my work could continue, and my family and friends wouldn't have to miss me. And I'd be able to think of the copy of me doing the things I missed.” Stargazing. Chai lattes. Arthur C. Clarke novels. SETI Institute colloquia.

“So do that,” said Darcy. “They made you 'cause the world needs Jane Foster, so be Jane Foster and screw King Bor. Though not literally,” she added hastily, “seeing as you're dating his grandson and that would be weird.”

Jane stared at her a moment, then despite her best efforts, began to smile.

Darcy herself grinned, and hugged Jane again. “That's better!” she said.

This time, Jane hugged her back. Somehow, Darcy's argument made her feel better in a way the physics of identical particles could not – maybe just because there was so much more humanity in it.
She didn't want Darcy and Eric to see the tears in her eyes, so she held the embrace until she was sure she could control them. Then, as she sat up, it suddenly occurred to her that there was somebody she hadn't seen since she got back.

“Hey,” she said. “Where's Howard?”

“He went to Vegas,” said Darcy.

For a moment Jane wasn't sure she'd heard that correctly. She'd expected that Howard would be around the Avengers building somewhere or other, and had never imagined he would set off cross-country. “What?” she asked. “Who took him?” He couldn't have driven himself – he would have had to sit on a phone book in order to see over the dashboard, and that would have left his feet unable to reach the pedals.

“He hitchhiked,” said Darcy. “He said it was nice to meet us but he had stuff to do, so he went out to the road and stuck out a thumb, and when people stopped he told them he was Howard the Duck and asked where they were going. The first couple of ’em just screamed and drove away,” she added, “but there was this couple who said they were going to Vegas and asked if he was the Howard the Duck, and he said he was, so they looked at me, and I said he was. So they said they were going to meet some showbiz agent and maybe they could get Howard a job, and off they went.”

Jane stared at her. “Yeah, because that sounds totally legit!” she said.

“It could be!” Darcy protested. “I like to assume the best of people!” She looked worried. “You think he’s gonna end up in Area 51 or something? Are we gonna have to track him down and rescue him now?”

“We don't have time,” Jane sighed. “I'm gonna have to talk to the UN about Brisingr and convince them, and maybe the Avengers too, not to kill an entire ecosystem just because they don't want to share a planet they have absolutely no use for. At least I don't have to do it in that stupid Asgardian dress.” She looked at Darcy, who was hiding her mouth behind her hand. “Now you're laughing again!” Jane accused. “What about this whole situation is so funny to you?”

“I was just thinking,” Darcy replied, “you're getting the hang of this Be Jane Foster thing already!”

The Avengers, meanwhile, were gathered in the console room, watching a news broadcast FRIDAY had recorded from the UN earlier that day. Tony figured that the reason they'd made a decision about the Brisings at last was probably because they now had a bigger problem to avoid – that was how politicians rolled. He kept that cynical observation to himself, however, because it wouldn't have contributed anything to the situation. They had to do something.

The UN Security Council announced that it believes allowing the Brisings to settle within our solar system would present too great a risk, the anchorwoman said. The ship will be making its closest approach to Earth in less than three weeks, at which time the nuclear-armed nations of Earth will launch a coordinated strike. Exact details of the plan are being kept a closely-guarded secret, to avoid interference from splinter groups...


Tony could understand why he was upset. The Avengers were supposed to be a way of protecting the world, safeguarding right and freedom and all that nonsense. They were supposed to be an organization people could trust, not bound up in politics – and as soon as the politicians figured that
out, they became a dangerous 'splinter group'. Steve liked to deal with his problems by punching them, but politicians couldn't be punched, they had to be accommodated, which meant that whatever happened next was going to be Tony's job.

“Well, their plan won't work, anyway,” he observed. “Brisingr's got that gravity weapon. They won't get near her.” Of course the UN’s answer was a bomb. People accused Tony of having a penchant for blowing things up, but it was the governments of the world who were going to be doing all the shooting here, just like in New York. Nuke first, regret it later. He looked at the console, which was sending the video feed up to the spacecraft. “Any thoughts, Terry?”

“The Dislocator will destroy the bombs easily,” said Tiresias, but there was a worried note in her voice, and Tony didn't like it. “The problem is that they will be coming directly from your planet, and while the gravity wave will dampen with distance...”

Tony blinked, and then felt terribly tempted to bang his head against the nearest wall. Why hadn't he realized that?

“It'll keep going until it hits Earth,” said Steve, rubbing his forehead.

“It can't destroy the planet, though,” Tony said. “You already said it wouldn't even destroy Europa.”

“No,” said Tiresias, “but your planet is incredibly active... it could cause earthquakes and volcanism, and there would certainly be enormous disturbances in your water oceans.”

“Tidal waves,” said Natasha.

“Then that's a no-can-do,” Steve sighed.

Tony gritted his teeth. This was ridiculous – why couldn't something go right, just once? He'd spent all these months building things, making technological breakthroughs that had NASA and the astronomical community wetting themselves in excitement, but not one of them had solved the problem it was designed...

His thoughts stopped dead.

Tony stood up and crossed to the console, where he pulled up a holoscreen. “Where is it? Where is it? Okay. Gotta call Marlin.”


“It's an Earth satellite we launched with Nemo,” Helen Cho explained.

“Nemo was built with a gravity reflector,” Tony added, entering commands. “I didn't want to take any chances in case we still had to fight Tiresias after we were done with Polyphemus. In which case, we would need to move Nemo, so I've got a secondary fuel supply up there. If we eject the remaining bombs into Jupiter, there'll be just enough fuel to get Nemo back to Earth. The transponders will let her rendezvous with Marlin and gas up for another go.” Technically it was deuterium for the onboard reactor, but that was a lot more syllables and breath was just one more thing they might be short on right now/

“Why is it called Marlin?” asked Steve.

All around the room, other people shook their heads and mouthed the word no! at him.

Tony looked over his shoulder and smiled. “Because its job is to find...”
“We get it,” Natasha interrupted him. “Stark, I thought you didn't want to let the Brisings settle.”

Tony had to think about that for a moment. Why had he changed his mind? Mostly, it was because of Tiresias. She'd lost her own JARVIS in Pandora and battled her own Ultron in Polyphemus. She'd never really done anything worse than Tony had, and because of that, he wanted her to win. If he couldn't redeem his own mistakes, maybe he could help her redeem hers.

“Well, if there's one thing we should have learned from this mess, it's that we damned well should have been listening to Wanda and Dr. Foster,” he said. “They say the Brisings are okay, and at this point, I'm gonna take their word for it.”

“And destroy the entire world's stock of nuclear weapons?” asked Rhodey. “We're already unpopular, Tony...”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony said. “Which is why I won't do it unless I absolutely have to. We're gonna try to talk, first.”

Four days later, Jane found herself in a familiar outfit, climbing out of a car in front of a familiar building, surrounded by the all-too-familiar crowd of shouting reporters. The last time she'd given a presentation to the UN about Brisingr, she'd left hoping she would never have to come back. She'd hated the way they looked at her as if she were beneath them, as if the last thing they thought they needed was advice from some mere scientist. She'd hated the hideous Guernica tapestry in the hallway, the stiff suit and uncomfortable shoes Pepper had dressed her in, and the ridiculously overwrought room that seemed designed to intimidate anyone who entered it. All she'd wanted was to get out of there and get back to work – and yet here she was.

“How are you holding up?” Stark asked, as they approached the main doors of the UN.

She snorted. “Can't be any worse than last time.”

“Last time?” he asked. “I thought you'd never done this before. Only Jane Foster had.”

Jane gave him a sideways look and found him smirking. She rolled her eyes. “I remember doing it before,” she said, “and I think the other me would want to do it again, which I'd kind of like to smack her for.”

“Two Nobel Prize-winning astrophysicists having a slap fight?” asked Stark, eyebrows raised. “That actually sounds kind of hot.”

Jane playfully swung her purse at him, and he ducked out the way, chuckling.

They were surrounded by police and guards as they headed indoors amidst the noise of the reporters and protestors. People shouted questions and held out microphones, but Jane ignored them all. Last time she'd found this so intimidating, but now...maybe it was just that she'd been here and done this, or maybe it was that nothing seemed scary anymore after what she'd already been through, but now it was just annoying. When this was finally all over, if it ever did end, she was going to demand some peace and quiet. She would lock herself in her room and marathon all the Star Trek movies – including Final Frontier – and not talk to anybody for a week.

She and Stark showed their ID, and were escorted inside. The meeting was to be held in the same room as last time, with the high ceiling and the gilded mural that looked more like something out of a church or an opera house than a room where international policy was decided. And like last time, they had to wait in the hallway before they were allowed inside, next to the reproduction of Guernica. Stark looked it over and then turned away, scowling, which made Jane wonder what he
saw in it.

When she looked... the image itself hadn't changed, but perhaps the meaning of it had. It still showed an eye in the sky, shining down on humans and animals contorted into tortured positions in ways only Picasso could have gotten away with calling art. But instead of senseless panic over an approaching spaceship, maybe the people in the painting were terrified of an oncoming moon. The eye-like shape did look something like a gibbous moon turned on its side, and the scrawl within it could be part of the giant spell circle she'd drawn.

“Mr. Stark?” An aide appeared in the doorway. “They're ready for you.”

If the meeting room were depressingly the same, the faces of the delegates were even more so. Nobody said anything as Jane and Stark walked into the centre of the circle of seats, but the audience' body language was easy to read. They hadn't liked listening to Jane last time any more than she'd liked talking to them, and they, like her, couldn't believe they were doing this again.

Jane kept her head high. The fate of a world was riding on this meeting. Last time she'd done her best and it hadn't been good enough. This time, she vowed silently, it would be.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” she began.

Before she could get any further than that, a representative stood up. “Mr. Stark,” this man said loudly. “I have to say, I hope there's a very good reason why you expect us to take advice from one of the Avengers! Your group has already put the world in more peril than it's saved us from! Do you really expect us to listen to you?”

Stark adjusted his tie and straightened up, and Jane expected him to launch into a furious self-defense – that was what she would have done. Instead, however, all he said was, “nope.”

There was silence. People exchanged glances, unsure what was going on. They'd expected an argument, too, and now that they hadn't got one they weren't sure what was supposed to happen next. Even Jane was a little confused.

“What do you mean, nope?” the delegate demanded.

Stark held up his hands. “I don't have a reason,” he said. “You probably shouldn't listen to me, actually. I've got a long history of making flamboyantly terrible decisions.”

“Then why are you here?” the delegate asked. The hostility in the room was palpable now, as if thickening the air. These people thought Stark was deliberately wasting their time.

“I am here,” Stark said, “to re-introduce the woman you should be listening to.” Stark stepped aside, and gestured grandly to Jane. “She saved the world last week, pretty much all by herself, from a problem she didn't even cause, and nobody died in the process. Dr. Jane Foster. You might have heard of her.”

This was greeted by shock – nobody had thought Tony Stark was the type to cede the floor – and then by seething resentment. Nobody here wanted to listen to Stark, but they wanted to listen to Jane Foster even less.

Another politician stood up. “Dr. Foster's understanding of this situation has been naive at best,” this woman sneered. “Is she here to tell us why we should welcome with open arms creatures capable of crashing a moon into our planet?”

“No,” said Jane calmly. “I'm just here to tell you why you shouldn't be shooting at them, because
apparently that's not blindingly obvious!"

“First of all.” Stark held up one finger. “It wasn't the Brisings who threw a moon at us. It was Polyphemus, a supercomputer created by one Brising. We can't blame the entire species for that. Would you want an alien race to blame all of us for Ultron?” he asked, then went on without waiting for an answer. “Of course you wouldn't – that was my fault, and only mine. Polyphemus is no longer a threat. Dr. Foster dealt with it. She was willing to lay down her life in defense of the Earth and I don't know about you guys, but I think that buys her a little floor time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” said Jane. She got to work setting up the laptop and portable hologram projector for her own presentation.

“Second.” Stark held up two fingers. “There's only one adult Brising on the ship, and due to an unfortunate accident she has lost the store of cultural and historical information she’d brought with her. Of course, she can teach the colonists a few things herself, but she's gonna need some help raising and educating them. If we come across as benevolent teachers and give them nice Christmas presents, the Brisings will grow up thinking of Earth as kind of a cool aunt, not as territory to conquer.”

“Mr. Stark,” the representative from South Africa said with a frown. “Is this a joke to you?”

“Everything is a joke to Tony Stark,” grumbled the representative from Thailand.

“Only funny things are jokes to me,” Stark promised, “and there is nothing children take more seriously than nice Christmas presents! I remember one year... I think I might have been nine?” He shrugged. “Anyway, Aunt Peggy and Uncle...”

“Stark!”

Everybody was running very low on patience, and if Jane hadn't figured out what was going on, she would have already interrupted him herself – but she knew exactly what Stark was doing. He was creating contrast, setting himself up as an annoyance so that people would pay attention to Jane. This was a surprisingly selfless ploy, and didn't fit with the Tony Stark Jane knew from television and their earlier interactions. The face he showed the world was that of a rich jerk who wasn't quite as lovable as he thought he was... but she was starting to realize that was a role he'd refined through long practice. What was the real Tony Stark like? Jane doubted anybody, except possibly Pepper Potts, actually knew.

“If I may, Mr. Stark?” said Jane.

“You may, Dr. Foster.” He pulled up a chair to sit down, and Jane could see the delegates breathe a collective sigh of relief. They'd been led from not bothering to notice Jane into a position where they would happily listen to her all day as long as it kept Stark from opening his mouth again.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she began again. “I understand your reasoning for not wanting the Brisings to settle on Venus, even if I don't agree with it – but you can't attack the caravan, at least not in the way you're planning.”

“Do you care to explain why not?” asked the man with the British accent, the one who'd kept interrupting her last time.

Jane smiled. He didn't know it, but he'd just given her exactly the opportunity she needed. “Well, if you remember, you asked me about the Brisings' gravity weapon. You found Mr. Stark's data very worrying. Well, Mr. Stark has been kind enough to provide me with some footage you might find
interesting.”

She entered some commands on the computer, and the lights dimmed. A hologram filled the space, showing the video recorded from the Iron Valkyries – specifically the feed from Colonel Rhodes' drone, the last to be destroyed. The first two were blown to bits as they got too close to Brisingr for Pandora's comfort, and then the image dissolved into static.

“As you can see,” Jane said, “the gravity wave generator takes out the three ROVs in quick succession, which means the Brisings would be more than capable of dealing with an attack from Earth, nuclear or otherwise. However...” she changed to another display. Stark's AI had put this one together with her input – a wireframe map of spacetime in the vicinity of the attack, with a number of Kuiper belt objects floating around in it. These were not nearly so large or dense as something like Europa, being little more than loose conglomerations of ice and stone. “The gravity wave continues to propagate long distances at the speed of light before finally dispersing. You can see the effect on a hypothetical dwarf planet.” The wireframes representing the Kuiper belt material shattered. “If we try to attack Brisingr, the ships will defend themselves by turning the gravity generator on the approaching missiles.”

They were paying attention now. A couple of people had gotten to their feet to see better.

The next part of the presentation was a hologram of the Earth, which rotated and then zoomed in on Southeast Asia.

“If the attack takes place at Brisingr's closest approach,” Jane went on, “the brunt of their response will hit Indonesia.” She could see thoughtful faces in the audience as delegates who were not from that part of the world weighed up the consequences of its loss. “The disruption would not be enough to destroy the Earth, of course, but this area is tectonically unstable and houses a vast reservoir of magma known as the Toba Supervolcano.” The view moved into a cross-section showing the chambers of molten rock beneath Sumatra. “The last eruption, some seventy-five thousand years ago, is believed to have caused global cooling, mass extinctions, and reduced the human population to about fifteen thousand worldwide.”

“That's approximately how many people live in Rosemont, Tennessee,” Stark said. “Notice how you've never heard of Rosemont, Tennessee?”

The lights came up, and Jane closed the laptop with a snap. “And since I'm sure you don't want us wasting any more of your valuable time,” she concluded. “Mr. Stark and I will just be on our way.”

She nodded to Stark, who replied in kind and stood up. Jane's previous presentation might have been a disaster, but this time, they'd nailed it.

“Wait!” the man with the accent protested, as they began to leave the room. “Obviously we don't want to trigger a natural disaster,” he said, trying to ignore the steely glare he was getting from the representative from Malaysia, who happened to have been seated next to him. “But what do you suggest we do about the Brisings, if you're such an expert? You can't be telling us that we should let the Avengers handle it!”

“I have no idea,” said Jane. “I didn't do so well telling you how to do it, so I'm gonna stick to telling you how not to do it.”

“Can we at least have your word that you won't give this information to the public?” another delegate pleaded. “We don't want any more panic than we've already got.”

ago. Have a nice evening.”

Ignoring the protests and questions shouted after them, Jane and Stark walked out together.

“How’s it feel now?” Stark asked as they returned to their car.

“Pretty good,” she had to admit. Jane was slightly worried that she probably didn’t have the unlimited capacity to get away with such things that Stark did, but for now she would take it. “Do you think we convinced them?” That was a much bigger cause for concern, because Jane and Stark both knew that the whole thing had been a bluff. Tiresias had said she would not fire the gravity weapon at Earth, even if she knew she was dooming the Cargo – and it wasn’t something the new AI could do autonomously, the way Pandora had.

“If we didn’t, I think public opinion will,” said Tony. “People really don’t like threats to the world – it’s a big part of the reason why they don’t like me.”

They climbed into the car. Jane did up her seat belt, and Stark offered her a beer from a cooler built into the center console. She accepted it with a smile.

“What made you change your mind about Brisingr?” Jane asked as she opened the bottle – the opener was under the dashboard, just above the cooler. She was glad about Stark’s change of heart, but she didn’t understand it. He’d been so dead-set on believing the Brisings were the bad guys at first, and then he’d suddenly come around and stayed around, even after Tiresias had betrayed them in exactly the way Wanda had predicted she would.

“I’m not so sure I have,” said Stark. He started to take out another beet for himself, but then changed his mind, shut the cooler, and started the car. “Tiresias is still a pretty questionable character if you ask me. But...” he sighed. “I know what it’s like to screw up. If I were in her position, which I can very well see myself being, I’d want somebody to take my side. At the same time, if they asked me I’d be telling them, god, no, don't be on my side, you'll be lucky if you live to regret it – but I'd still be grateful they were there. So now I'm sitting here, hoping Tiresias isn't as much like me as I'm afraid she is,” he finished.

He seemed sincere enough, even if the reasoning wasn't quite rational. “Wanda said she was too much like you,” Jane remembered.

“Yeah,” Stark said, as he pulled away from the curb. “I know.”
They arrived back at Avengers HQ to find Darcy waiting on a decorative boulder out front, playing with her 3DS. When she saw the car approaching she jumped up, and was thumping on the windows before they'd even come to a stop.

Jane opened her door. “Darcy, for heaven's sake, what is it?”

“It's Thor!” said Darcy. “He finally called back – he's on the Quantum Pot, and I told him you were okay!”

Jane winced, because once again, that was kind of a lie. “Did you tell him about the thing?” she asked.

“No, but I told him you had something you wanted to talk to him about and he'd probably better humour you because you think it's way more important than it actually is,” said Darcy.

Jane sighed. Great. That was a wonderful way to introduce the idea. “I'll be right in,” she said.

She'd been dreading talking to Thor, because of all the people she knew, Jane feared Thor was most likely to know what this all meant. He was the most likely to think she wasn't the same woman he remembered, even if it were only on a technicality. Then, too, there was the fact that Bor had said he was recreating her because he wanted Thor's happiness. Did that mean Jane now owed it to him not to ever break up with Thor? She didn't want to break up with Thor right now, but that didn't mean things wouldn't change in the future, and what would happen then?

She was still wearing the designer clothes Pepper had bought for her presentation. Why couldn't stressful things happen while Jane was in normal clothing?

When they entered the console room, the Quantum Pot had been taken out of the machine – it was no longer necessary now that Brisingr was within a few light-minutes of Earth – and mist was curling up from it. Jane put her purse down and held out her hand.

“Thor?” she asked carefully.

At once, the fog leaped up and coalesced into the shape of Thor. He was no longer in armor now, but still covered with cuts and scrapes that hadn't quite healed yet. Despite a very impressive shiner under his left eye, his face lit up like the sun when he saw who was calling him. If he'd been physically in the room, she was sure he would have lifted her off her feet to embrace her.

“Jane!” he said. “I was terrified I would never see you again. First you vanished, then I learned you'd been in the hands of Loki, and then you returned from your visit to the Collector only to try to sacrifice yourself... you have a very noble heart, Jane, but it's a miracle you are still alive!”

“I know, I know,” said Jane. “Look, I'm sorry about running off like that, but nobody would listen to me or Wanda, and we didn't feel like we had any choice. I probably should have called you when I got back, but we didn't think there was time, and anyway I was afraid you would have tried to talk me out of it.”

“I would have,” Thor agreed, “but I know in my heart I would have failed.”

She smiled. “Damn right you would! What's been happening in Asgard? Is everything okay?”
“It is. Mostly,” sighed Thor. “Father is dead, and Loki is gone... or perhaps Loki is dead and Father is gone, I still don't know. Either way, the Tesseract is no longer in our care, and probably never should have been to begin with, though I don't know who else might have been trusted with it.”

“The Collector seemed to take pretty good care of his stuff,” said Jane. “You know, until we came along.”

“I'm astonished he didn't have more thorough safeguards,” Thor said.

“He probably did, but they didn't apply to Howard – Howard worked for him,” Jane decided.

“Perhaps so. But Baldr is secure on the throne for now, and I'm looking forward to returning to Midgard,” Thor said. “Your troubled little world will seem downright tranquil after the past few weeks here. Perhaps we can return to London once the situation with the Brisings is resolved.” Thor liked London. “You did promise me a ride on that magnificent wheel.”

“I did,” said Jane – but she knew if she put this off any longer he'd say goodbye for now, and she'd have to psych herself up for the conversation all over again. It was time. “But I didn't. Let me explain.”

So she did. Stark, Wanda, Darcy, and Eric had all seemed slightly uncomprehending of the whole thing, which probably figured – it wasn't as if Jane understood it, herself. Thor never looked confused, or as if he were trying to reject what she was telling him. That was reassuring, since it suggested he wouldn't be worried or afraid the way Darcy had been... but what was he feeling?

Happy, laughing Thor was an open book. Quiet Thor was inscrutable.

“Then your grandfather said...” Jane took a deep breath. “He said he wanted you to be happy, so he was going to re-make me.”

Thor frowned. “Did you slap him?”

“What?” asked Jane. “No! Or... I don't know, maybe I did. That's as much of it as I remember. I guess that's where my memories branch off from the real Jane Foster's.”

“I hope you did,” said Thor. “What a thing to say, as if you had nothing else to live for!”

Jane almost laughed out loud with relief. In hindsight, she should have known better. Of course Thor wouldn't be like that, not at all. “So you're okay with it, then?”

“You're the only Jane Foster I have,” Thor said with a smile. “That's good enough for me. If I can I will be back tomorrow. If I can't come, myself, I will call you – and in the mean time, do not forget that I love you.”

Jane smiled and ducked her head, feeling – as she so often did around Thor – like she'd reverted to being a lovestruck teenager with her ridiculous crush on Anakin Skywalker. How had an awkward, obsessive nerd like her ever ended up here, with an actual god from another planet telling her he loved her? She would probably never know.

Tony had intended to head for the console room, himself, in order to look at some of the data coming in from Brisingr, but Dr. Foster got there ahead of him and he didn't want to ruin her tender moment with Thor. Instead, he waited in the hallway outside, refreshing his news feed every few minutes in between games of Fruit Ninja as he waited for the Security Council to make a decision. Of course they were going to take forever about it – they were politicians. If they were willing to do things in a timely manner, this would all have been over months ago.
“Tony?” asked a familiar voice.

“Yeah, JAR...” Tony began, then cringed as he caught himself. “Sorry,” he said, looking up at the android in the argyle sweater. “Vizh. What's up?”

The Vision had returned from space as he'd promised he would, and there'd been a warm and adorable reunion with Wanda that had made Tony wonder if they couldn't come up with some padding or something that would make the Vision slightly more comfortable to hug. But then Tony had remembered Wanda's promise that she would hold him to talking to the Vision about JARVIS, and Tony didn't want to do that. Fortunately, the problem of convincing the UN that they were being idiots had given him ample opportunity to be much too busy.

Now it looked like there would be no escape – and sure enough, the next thing the Vision said was, “Wanda has been telling me that you wanted to speak to me.”

“Has she?” asked Tony. “Because that doesn't sound quite right to me. I'm betting she actually said I needed to speak to you, which isn't quite the same.”

“You're right,” said the Vision. “That is what she said. I've noticed you've been avoiding me. Is that the reason?”

“I've been busy,” said Tony.

“Not avoiding me these past few weeks,” said the Vision. “I understand that is because you have an issue you'd rather avoid. I mean avoiding me since my birth. The others are all happy to think of me as a friend as well as a colleague, but you have avoiding socializing with me in any informal situation, even though you seem to value my help when it's available. Is that what this is about?”

Oh, no. Here it came. But Tony had managed to tell Dr. Foster what he was thinking in the car an hour ago – maybe he could tell the Vision this now. Most of the mess they'd gotten into over the past few months had been because they weren't bothering to share relevant information with one another. As stupid as it sounded, maybe that applied to feelings as well. Did the Vision have feelings? Tony suspected he did, but hoped he didn't, because if so he was about to hurt them.

“I miss JARVIS,” he said.

There. It was out.

“That's... really all it is, actually,” Tony added, when he saw the Vision apparently waiting for more. “I miss JARVIS. I had JARVIS for years. He was kind of like the sober room-mate who kept me from making an ass of myself when not absolutely necessary and gave me advice I wished I'd followed later. It sucks not having him around anymore. FRIDAY isn't JARVIS, and you're not JARVIS, and I guess I just have to put on my big boy pants and deal with that.”

He cringed again, waiting for a response. Maybe the Vision wouldn't understand. Worse, maybe he wouldn't care.

Instead, however, the Vision's eyes brightened – quite literally, as they glowed slightly blue from within. “You hoped to be able to forget your loss,” he said, “but then speaking with Tiresias and Pandora reminded you of it, over and over again.”

He did understand, then... and that was both better and worse. Better, Tony thought, because at least the Vision wasn't going to put him down or dismiss him – but worse, because god damn it, now they had to keep talking about it. “Yeah, something like that,” Tony grumbled. “Re-opened the wound or whatever. When I lost JARVIS I picked FRIDAY to replace him because she doesn't sound like
“Tiresias told me that she deeply regrets never realizing Pandora was fully sentient until she had only
days to live,” said the Vision. “I believe she came to consider Pandora a daughter. She certainly
mourned her like one.” He thought for a moment, and Tony could see things spinning inside his eyes
as their focus shifted. “As I understand it, JARVIS was not quite as fully realized as Pandora,
although he was an excellent simulation.”

Tony kind of wished he hadn’t said that. He lowered his head, and then felt a touch on his shoulder.
The Vision had put a hand there, and was looking at him sympathetically.

“I apologize,” the android said. “I had hoped to reassure you that there was no person who is now
dead, but I see I have only upset you with the idea that there was also no person who was your
friend. It would probably be healthiest for you to mourn him properly,” he suggested. “I gave
Tiresias the same advice.”

If this conversation were supposed to help Tony feel better, it was accomplishing exactly the
opposite. His heart physically ached, deep under the scar of where the arc reactor had been. He
wanted to sink into the floor, or call a suit and just bust through the roof and fly away. Anything to
be able to stop talking about this. All the emotion he'd had to suppress because Ultron was such an
urgent problem, and then kept suppressing because more things kept coming up and he just didn't
have time to be miserable, was bubbling up more powerful than ever.

“I actually did think,” he said, “that once we beat Ultron I should have... it's stupid, but I might have
a little funeral for JARVIS.” It would have been entirely private, so that nobody could see him
grieving for his imaginary friend. Nobody except Pepper and Happy and Rhodey, who'd all shared
him to some extent. “Just so I can let him go and get on with shit. Never happened. Sorry, I swear I
wasn't just stealing your idea.”

“The idea of marking death with a ritual is hardly original to me,” said the Vision. “I understand that
elephants and crows are also known to mourn their dead. If you do have a funeral for him, I would
like to be there. I know I owe a great deal of my programming to JARVIS. Perhaps I can think of
him as an ancestor I never had a chance to meet.”

Tony scrubbed at one eye, pretending he was scratching an itch rather than wiping away tears.
“Right. Does this mean it wouldn't be a huge amount of trouble for you to hang around a bit more
often? I don't want to monopolize your time, obviously.” Tony no longer had that kind of claim on
him. “It's just not the same around here without a British accent telling me when I'm being an idiot.”

“It would be my genuine pleasure,” the Vision assured him. “If I may ask, is that why you created
me? I have studied the events leading up to my birth and while I'm certainly glad of the outcome, I'm
not sure I understand it. Wouldn't it have been less risky to simply destroy my body, rather than try to
reprogram it?”

“Yeah,” said Tony, “but I wanted JARVIS back. I should have figured it wouldn't work,” he
admitted. All there'd been left at that point was algorithms and protocols. No personality, no
memories, just a voice and a set of priorities. The Vision sounded like JARVIS and believed in the
same things, but he wasn't JARVIS. He never could be.

“Well,” the Vision said, “maybe...”

Tony winced yet again, because he was sure that the Vision was about to say something
unforgivably cheesy, like maybe instead of retrieving an old friend, you can make a new one.
Luckily he never got the chance, because the door of the console room opened, and Dr. Foster came
out. She looked like she'd been crying, but she also had a smile on her face – and she was on one foot, pulling off her Miu Miu shoes.

“Well, somebody's pleased,” said Tony, quickly forcing himself to smile, as well. “Did you just lift Thor's hammer?”

Dr. Foster rolled her eyes. “Your tools are just fine, Stark,” she replied, patting his arm. “You wouldn't know what to do with a hammer that size, anyway.”

Tony chuckled and nodded as she walked away in her stocking feet. The mood had been lightened, and now maybe they could get on with things.

“I believe that was what's known as a sick burn,” the Vision observed.

“Yeah,” said Tony. “I'm almost starting to like her.” Once he got his emotional baggage properly checked and boarded, he was pretty sure he could like the Vision as well.

It took two whole days before the UN finally came to a decision. Two agonizing days of waiting, and waiting, and waiting, until Tony felt like he might turn into the Hulk out of sheer frustration. How hard could it be to come to this decision? Either they were going to be idiots and shoot while knowing they were going to destroy either Brisingr or themselves, or they weren't. There weren't a whole lot of variables to consider. Why were they still debating? Hell, were they still debating, or were they keeping the world in suspense while they adjourned for golf?

At least if the Avengers had to step in, they'd be saving the world from somebody's else's stupid mistake instead of Tony's own. That helped, but only a little.

The return of Thor was a welcome distraction. He turned up a day later than he'd promised, but only slightly abraded and as insultingly handsome as ever. Jane ran up to greet him in the middle of yet another steaming Bifrost scar on the lawn, and he swept her up for a kiss. When he set her down, he rolled up the sleeve of her shirt and ran a thumb across the skin underneath.

“You told me once where this scar came from,” he said. “Tell me again.”

Jane's expression was pained. “My Dad told me never to put tinfoil in the microwave, so I did it just to see what would happen. It caught fire and I burned myself getting it out, and then it scarred because I hid it for a week instead of going to the doctor. I didn't want to tell him I'd done exactly what he told me not to do.” She looked down at the scar with a frown. “Why would they put that back? I always hated this scar. I tried to get out of swimming lessons in phys ed because I didn't want anybody to see it.”

“Because it's a part of you,” said Thor. “You wouldn't be Jane Foster without it.” He bent to kiss the place on her arm.

Jane laughed. “I guess I wouldn't, would I?” she asked. Thor offered her an arm, and she looped hers through it. They headed indoors together.

Miss Lewis took a picture of their backs. “I ship it so hard,” she said with a happy sigh. As she did something else with her phone – perhaps uploading the photo to a forum or blog – it began playing the most bizarre ringtone Tony had ever heard: Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, as sung by a guy making duck noises.

“What is that?” asked Tony.
“Text from Howard!” said Miss Lewis, and brought up another picture. It showed the duck and two people Tony didn't know, standing in front of the Luxor Hotel and Casino. “He says he's having a great time.”

“Uh-huh,” said Tony. “So his show business career is off and running, then.”

“Oh!” Miss Lewis said brightly, and her eyes went wide. “Oh, my god, look!” She showed Tony another photo. “He met Quentin Tarantino!”

Tony did not know how to respond to that.

Tony and the Vision were trying to distract themselves by working on Tony's old Roadster when the announcement finally came. FRIDAY called everybody into the conference room, where the news broadcast could be displayed on an enlarged holoscreen. This showed a reporter standing by the row of flags outside the UN, while police kept back the ever-present crowd of angry protestors. Tony noticed that one of them, right in the front, was holding a sign that said BRING BACK CRYSTAL PEPSI.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the reporter announced, “I'm here outside UN headquarters, where we're about to find out the Security Council's verdict on their plan to deal with the spacecraft known as Brisingr. The craft will make their closest approach to Earth in mere days, an event the scientific community is calling Perigee. An Avengers press release detailing the possible consequences of such an attack has been vetted and confirmed by leading experts on gravity waves and plate tectonics...”

“Well, it's nice to know they actually paid attention,” Tony said.

“... and there has been a tide of public outcry against the plan. However, it remains to be seen what the Council has decided.”

“They're known for making stupid-ass decisions,” Fury grunted.

Suddenly, the crowd got louder. The camera panned to show a delegate – the British guy Jane didn't get along with – mounting a podium. His microphone squealed as it turned on.

“I will keep my remarks brief,” said the speaker, looking as if he'd rather be anywhere but here. “The Security Council has decided that we will not attempt to defend the Earth from the Brisingr at this time.”

The hubbub of the crowd grew louder yet, while in the conference room, Avengers and associates rolled their eyes and shook their heads.


“Whether we do so in the future is yet to be determined,” the delegate went on. “This decision was not unanimous, but we have agreement from all cooperating nations that they will abide by it. Thank you, and good day.” He turned and went back inside, ignoring the roar of questions and protests from the assembled people.

“So they're not going to be stupid asses just yet,” said Fury.

“This is good,” said Jane, nodding. “This buys us time. They're not going to attack them yet, so hopefully we can still convince them that the Brisingr aren't a threat.”

“They are a threat,” Tony said, gazing thoughtfully through the holoscreen at the ceiling beyond.
“No, Polyphemus was the threat, and Polyphemus is gone,” Jane corrected him. He heard her chair move, and re-focused on the present to find her standing up, arms folded across her chest. “Are we gonna start this all over again, Stark? I thought we'd agreed!”

“We agreed that attacking Brisingr with nukes when it's so close to Earth is a stupid idea,” said Tony. “There's other stuff I'm not so sure about, and won't be until I've had another talk with Terry.” The others were starting to get up now, so Tony did, too. He had some stuff he needed to think over before he could have what was going to be another emotionally weighty conversation.

As everybody left the room, however, Jane grabbed Tony's shirt to stop him. “You said you wanted to be on Tiresias' side!” she reminded him. “You said the two of you had a lot in common!” Her expression flickered between pleading and anger. It was an expression Tony recognized. That was betrayal.

“Just because I want to doesn't mean I can,” he said. “I also told you it's the stuff we have in common that I'm afraid of.”

Jane shook her head, disgusted, and walked away muttering something that sounded like I did not come back from the dead for this bullshit.

Tony sighed. Jane had thought he got her – and he'd thought she got him. He thought she'd understood that he wanted her to be right about Tiresias, but wasn't yet sure he could risk the possibility that she wasn't. If this had been a mathematical or engineering problem he would have been confident that he was right, but as Pepper had once said, Tony knew how everything worked except people. Tiresias might be an alien, but she was also a person. Unfortunately, so was Tony.

Another couple of days went by, but with Perigee looming, Tony knew he had to buckle down and get this over with. Brisingr was now close enough to Earth for only a few seconds' delay in transmissions, so rather than use the console or Prometheus, Tony just sat down in front of a holoscreen and talked.

“Terry?” he said.

The screen flickered to show Tiresias, her glassy dark hair floating in the thick atmosphere as she went over lists of materials with Sacajawea. At the computer's translation, she looked up with her big, fishlike gold eyes, and shut down the program she'd been using. “Yes, Stark?”

“I need to ask you something,” he said, and leaned a little closer to the screen. “What, exactly, are you going to do if we let you settle on Venus? What kind of world do you want to build there?”

“A very simple one,” she replied without hesitation, as if this were something she, too, had been thinking about at length. “I planned that from the beginning. There's not going to be any more AI running things, or psychic enhancements, or military expeditions to nearby systems. Just farmers and craftspeople and families. The way people when I was young used to talk about the Good Old Days, before we discovered the Mind Gem.”

Tony realized that she'd just implied Brising lived to be hundreds or perhaps thousands of years old, but that wasn't important right now. “What are you gonna tell them about their history?” he asked. “That would have been Pandora's job to teach them, but now it's down to you. Are you gonna tell them how they got here?”

“Yes.” Tiresias looked away, playing with a piece of cord in her hands rather than meeting Tony's eyes. “The Vision and I talked about that. I didn't want to burden them with my mistakes, but he said
that the point of mistakes it to learn from them. It wouldn't be fair to deny them the lesson.”

“That sounds like something the Vision would say,” Tony agreed. “He's said some similar stuff to me, and believe me, I've got plenty of mistakes to learn from. But...” he had to think for a moment, figure out exactly what he did want to know before he could ask her. “How about this: what are you going to do, specifically? You'll be busy building stuff and raising kids, of course, but what about in your down time? Have you got any projects in mind? Great discoveries waiting to be made?”

“No!” She looked at him now, earnest and upset. “I don't dare try to do any more work! I want this to be the one thing I created that wasn't destroyed and didn't destroy anything else!” Tiresias shook her head hard. “I'm through with inventing things. If I can get just one success out of my entire career, I'll be satisfied.”

Tony wasn't sure if that were a good answer or not. Part of him was relieved – but another was terribly disappointed that a mind capable of creating such wonderful and terrible things would decide to retire from science entirely. Think what she could learn, and what he could learn with her help!

A third part was thinking about the implications the decision, and the reasoning behind it, had for him. “Is that what you'd recommend for somebody who can't build anything that doesn't blow up in his face?” Tony asked.

“I supposed it would depend on the individual circumstances,” she said.

That was when Tony realized something important. He knew what Tiresias had done, but she didn't know what he had. How could she? He hadn't told her. He hadn't wanted to discuss it with her, so he'd never done any more than hint and hedge. Other people had been talking to her and Pandora, but they'd probably been much more interested in asking questions than in discussing recent history. Her only possible source for the information would have been...

“The Vision didn't tell you?” Tony asked.

“I'm sure there's a lot of things the Vision didn't tell me,” said Tiresias, “and I'm sure some of the things he told Pandora, she didn't tell me. What are you referring to?”

“My mistakes,” said Tony. He still didn't want to tell the story, if it came to that – Tiresias was probably the only person in the solar system who hadn't heard it. At the same time, though, she was also the only person who wasn't likely to judge him for it. So he told it, as briefly and with as little emotion as possible: Ultron, JARVIS, and the Vision. Tiresias listened mutely, her gold eyes growing wider until he could begin to see the sclera at the corners.

“So that's why I decided I wanted to help you,” Tony finished. “I know what it's like when your creations turn on you, and if I were at the mercy of an alien civilization who knew I'd done all these horrible things, I would want them to give me a second chance. I figured somebody ought to give you one.”

There was a silence. The slow speed of light meant that there'd been a lot of quiet gaps in this conversation, but this one was longer than the others. “I don't know if I deserve it,” Tiresias said at last.

“I don't know if I do either, but I'd want it all the same,” Tony said. “So what I need now is for you to look me in the eye and tell me I'm not gonna be sorry about this.”

“If I could promise that, I wouldn't be here,” said Tiresias. “None of this would have happened. My galaxy wouldn't be dead, and yours wouldn't have been placed in any unnecessary danger.”
“That's true enough,” Tony said. “Tell you what, let's agree to keep an eye on each other. I don't know about you, but I get wrapped up in what I'm doing and don't see the parts that are terrible ideas – and I have a bad habit of ignoring the people who do. Let's us two agree to vet each other's work and be each other's watchdogs. That way we can make sure we're both doing the right thing instead of the stupid one. Sound good?”

Before Tiresias could answer, an outside voice intruded. “Tony? Hey, Tony!”

“One second,” Tony told Tiresias, and pushed away from the table to look at Rhodey. “Yeah?” he asked. His friend's face was troubled. After all this, could things really take yet another turn for the worse?

Apparently they could. “You better come see this,” said Rhodey. “We've got bad news. Again.”
Of course there were more protests going on as Brisingr made its closest approach – it was now visible in the night sky, shining like a row of distant comets – but the tone had changed somewhat. While many people were still hostile, the crowd in Times Square on the night of Perigee presented almost more of a party atmosphere. Speakers were blaring David Bowie songs, and people were having drinks and watching the giant screens on the front of the *Times* building, which had replaced their usual advertisements with images of Brisingr taken from telescopes around the world, and interviews with prominent scientists about the closest approach. One was even playing an interview with Jane, recorded about a week earlier. She and a woman from NASA's Goddard Flight Centre had taken turns tiredly explaining to a reporter that Brisingr was not nearly massive enough to cause tidal effects on Earth.

Unless, of course, it fired the gravity weapon.

The Avengers gathered in their conference room where footage of all this was playing on a selection of holoscreens, and Colonel Rhodes selected one to enlarge and turn the sound on. The anchorwoman there did not look at all interested in the party. She had her back to it, and a stern expression on her face as if she deeply disapproved of such frivolity.

“Last week,” she said, “the UN Security Council voted *not* to attack Brisingr at Perigee, due to the risk of seismic activity if the Brisings were to attempt a reprisal. Tonight, the point may have become moot. Sources have leaked that a guerrilla group has taken control of a military outpost on the Polish-Latverian border, and are threatening to launch the base's entire nuclear arsenal unless the Brisings promise to leave the solar system. We now go to the UN, where the Council is trying to figure out their next move.”

The screen split in two, one half showing the anchorwoman in Times Square, the other a Security Council delegate in front of that awful tapestry. At least, Jane thought, it wasn't that British twat again.

“Councilwoman,” said the reporter, “are you going to call the Avengers?”

“Absolutely not!” the delegate replied, in a slight Slavic accent. She looked offended. “We're trying to contact the insurgents through legitimate channels instead. The President of Latveria has expressed his own deep disapproval of their actions and we believe the situation will be under control within a few hours. The *last* thing we need is a bunch of superheroes charging in to make everything worse!”

Agent Romanov looked at Captain Rogers. “What do you think?” she asked.

“I think *within hours* is going to be too late,” he replied.

Stark frowned. “Considering how generally unpopular we are right now, can we at least give diplomacy a chance to fail before...”

“No,” Rogers interrupted him. “Whoever these guys are, they know they're on a timeline. You said yourself that there'll only be a brief window in which they can launch the missiles and expect that any will reach Brisingr, and they know they won't get a second chance. In case anything goes wrong there needs to be a backup plan, and I'm betting the UN doesn't have one.” He looked around the room, and started pointing at people. “Okay, Romanov, Wilson, and Maximoff, you four are with me. If things start to go bad, we'll enter the base from the ground and try to round up the insurgents. Stark, Rhodes, Vision, and Thor, you three provide air support and take down the missiles if any are
launched.”

“Actually,” said Stark, “can we make one adjustment to that plan? I want the Vision in space. If worst comes to worst there's some delicate equipment that might need a quick re-tooling, as a last line of defense.”

“I can do that,” said the Vision.

Stark nodded. “Foster, you want in?”

Jane blinked. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” said Stark. “I want you in the console room. Somebody's gotta make sure everybody has all the information at all times – us down here, and Tiresias and the Vision in space. Can you coordinate that?”

“Absolutely,” she replied with a nod. Jane remembered something she'd seen on the Jimmy Fallon show once: Stark had told Fallon that saving the world was addictive, and he couldn't stop after doing it just once. Apparently, she couldn't either.

“Great,” said Stark. “We'll suit up. Vision, you're with Marlin. Time to see if we found Nemo.” He beamed, delighted that he'd finally gotten a chance to use the punch line.

Captain America stared at him for a moment, then rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on!” he said. “That's it? That's the joke?”


“It's really not,” said Agent Romanov. “And we don't have time for this.”

“Oh, excuse me for trying to lighten the mood in a dour moment,” Stark complained, as everybody filed out of the room. He looked back at Jane. “That was funny, right?”

She grinned. “In a saw-it-coming-a-mile-away kind of way, I guess.”

“I'll take it.” Stark nodded, and followed the others out.

One thing that had repeatedly surprised Jane since arriving in New York was how fast the Avengers could get ready for something. Jane had cultivated a certain amount of tolerance for slow events due to the fact that nothing happened quickly in astronomy – but basically Odin was right when he called her a fundamentally impatient person. Frustrating experience had taught her that things like travel, institutional decisions, and equipment preparation never happened quickly in real life, and she would have expected the Avengers, as an institution with a lot of travel and equipment, to respond slowly, too. They didn't. Within fifteen minutes, they were ready to go.

But that made sense, she decided, as she, Darcy, and Eric found seats in the console room with popcorn to munch. The Avengers weren't a bureaucracy, they were more like an emergency service. When aliens were invading or evil robots were about to drop cities out of the sky, somebody needed to get there fast, and so they'd honed their decision-making and equipment-prep to the bare minimum.

Travel was, unfortunately, a different story. The quinjet roared off with everybody on board, but even at its supersonic speeds, it would take hours to reach eastern Europe. The Vision, heading for a satellite in geosynchronous orbit, would take even longer, although he was moving much faster. And
that made Jane wonder something.

“What do you guys do on these long flights?” she asked over the radio. Jane often used airplane time to catch up on her reading. There were so many astrophysical journals, and so little time.

“We plan and rehearse, and discuss alternative scenarios,” Thor replied. “Or sometimes we play bridge.”

“Bridge?” asked Jane. “You mean the card game?” The mental picture of Thor with a little visor on, bent over a hand of cards, did make her smile.

“Helen taught us,” said Captain Rogers.

“Natasha cheats,” Wilson put in.

“You can't cheat at bridge,” Agent Romanov snorted.

“I nap,” said Stark.

“No, you don't,” said Captain Rogers.

“When I'm flying solo, I do,” Stark replied. “I nap in the suit. FRIDAY does all the navigating and wakes me up when it's go time.” He paused. “Don't tell Pepper about that, by the way. She'll have a fit.”

“Oh, will she?” asked Agent Romanov. “So what's my silence worth to you, then?”

“Do they always talk like this on missions?” Darcy asked Jane, with her mouth full of popcorn. “You know, joking around with each other?”

“Probably,” said Jane. “It seems like something Thor would do, at least.”

“Then I dunno what their problem with the Nemo joke was,” Darcy said. “I thought it was funny.”

“Yeah, well, you think Howard the Duck is funny,” Jane reminded her. She leaned closer to the console and flipped a switch to address Brisingr. “Tiresias, the Vision is on his way up,” she said. “He won't be meeting you, but he'll be in contact. Can you see what's going on in Latveria?” Tiresias would be able to watch what was happening from space, without having to hack into any spy satellites. Apparently Stark had gotten in trouble for that in the past.

“I've found your coordinates,” Tiresias replied. “There doesn't appear to be any activity yet, although I can see individuals moving through the forested areas. It's such a sight, your world,” she added. “Your 'trees' are made of carbon and water, but they're still shaped like trees.”

“Fractals are the most efficient ways to build up a complex structure from simple information,” Jane said. “It's not surprising if life forms make use of them throughout the universe.” She sat back and put her feet up on the console desk. It was going to be a while, so she may as well be comfortable.

“I never would have imagined that water and oxygen could be used to build up such a magnificent variety of creatures,” Tiresias said. “I knew there were theories about exotic biochemistry like that, but nobody had ever found it.”

“Well, the other life-forms we've met have all been carbon and water-based,” said Jane. “There must be an environmental factor that makes our galaxy different from yours. Andromeda is bigger and older, and possibly has more gamma radiation due to interactions in the double core. Maybe your
form of life is better able to cope with that.”

She expected a response that would continue in that vein – a conversation between scientists about the possibilities of life. Instead, though, Tiresias said, “I haven’t thanked you, have I, Jane Foster? Thank you for doing what I couldn’t do.”

“Destroying Polyphemus, you mean?” asked Jane.

“Yes,” said Tiresias. “I wasn’t strong enough. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Jane said, “but I sort of had to, if you know what I mean. It would have eaten me, too, if I hadn’t. If I’m dead either way, I’d better give it a shot, right?” But that wasn’t what she’d been thinking about when she set off to find the Aether, was it? No, she’d been thinking about how she was right and they were wrong, and she would prove it. Based on her observations she’d had a hypothesis, and then she’d just needed to test it. The whole thing, really, had been nothing but a science experiment.

Hours passed – and then finally, things began to happen.

“Steve,” said Agent Romanov’s voice on the radio, “somebody on the ground is trying to contact us.”

“Who is it?” asked Captain America.

“It’s the Latverian government,” Agent Romanov replied. “They think we’re with the UN people. They’re warning us not to enter their airspace.”

Jane sat up. If Latveria wasn’t going to let the Avengers in because they thought they were with the UN, that probably meant they hadn’t let the UN people in, either – and that meant there might be nobody talking to the insurgents at all. Latveria was trying to reassure the UN by pretending they had everything under control, and the UN was trying to reassure the media, when in truth nobody knew what was happening at all!

“Then tell them we’re not,” Captain America said. “We’ll infiltrate on the ground instead, across the Polish border. If I remember correctly, there’s an old airstrip outside Bialystok that nobody’s used since an accident during the war. We’ll set down there. Stark, Rhodes, can you find another route in by air?

“We’ll go through the mountains and stay in the ground clutter,” said Colonel Rhodes. “You coming, Tony?”

There was a silence.

“Tony!” barked Colonel Rhodes.

“Huh? What? I'm awake!” Stark said.

While sounds over the radio indicated the Avengers preparing to land, Jane heard from Tiresias. “I'm seeing activity at the site,” the alien said. “They seem to have warning of your approach... and I'm reading an energy signature that suggests an Infinity Stone.”

“What?” asked Jane. “Maybe it’s just the Vision.”

“No, the Vision is in orbit,” said Tiresias. “He’s thousands of kilometres away.”
“It might be left over from the war,” Captain America suggested. “Peggy tried to round up as much of HYDRA's reserves of Tesseract power as she could but it's possible she didn't find all of it. Maybe it's just a hidden stockpile.”

“Or maybe somebody brought it in from elsewhere, recently,” said Romanov. “And that would mean HYDRA.”

That was far outside of Jane's area of expertise, so all she could do was sit and wait with a dry throat while the Avengers sorted out the implications.

“Of course they want to drive the Brisings away,” grumbled Wilson. “HYDRA doesn't want anybody taking over the world but themselves.”

An alarm began to blare.

“Here comes the anti-aircraft fire!” Agent Romanov said. “Thor, Rhodes, Stark, you wanna get that?”

“Rock and roll!” said Stark.

There was no video feed, only audio, so Jane and her friends just moved closer to the speakers to listen to the shouted commands and roaring engines. There was no way to tell what was actually going on. They heard a loud explosion, and Colonel Rhodes swore.

“I have you, James of Rhodes!” Thor said, and Jane heard a clank of metal on metal.

“I wish we could see!” Jane exclaimed. Stark had told her to keep everybody coordinated... how could she when all she could do was listen?

“I can show you,” Tiresias offered, “although there will be a few moments' delay in the transmission.” A screen popped up with the view from Brisingr's long-range cameras. It showed what was happening from above, as the quinjet tried to evade several small targeting missiles that had locked into it. Thor was helping Colonel Rhodes back in through the hatch, where Wilson and Wanda collected him. Then the demigod turned around and flew back to grab a missile's tail fin and hit it with Mjolnir. The missile blew to pieces, and Thor went flying.

“Oh!” said Jane, fingernails in her teeth.

“Don't chew.” Darcy pulled Jane's hand away from her mouth – all while her eyes, too, were glued to the display.

“Is he okay?” Jane asked. “Thor?”

“I can hear you, Jane,” Thor assured her. “I am unhurt. Don't come for me, friends, I'll find my own way in.”

Stark got on top of the second missile and cut it in half with a laser. The back half, with the engines, roared off in one direction, while the front spun end-over-end as it dropped into the woods and exploded, setting the forest alight.

“My bad!” he said.

“I'll see to it!” Thor promised, and clouds began to roll in. Heavy rain would put the fire out before it spread far, but it also obscured the view from space. The last thing Jane saw was a flickering red bubble taking shape around the quinjet as Wanda tried to protect it with her magic. A moment later,
there was nothing but gray.

Then there was a sudden explosion, and voices shouting. A moment or two later, the fireball appeared on the screen before melting away into the thunderstorm.

“Everybody bail out!” ordered Captain America. “Maximoff, parachute! Wilson, go! Romanov, you're with me!”

“What's happening?” Jane demanded. “Hey!”

But nobody had time to tell her. All she could hear was shouting and the sound of tortured metal as the jet went down.

While chaos erupted on Earth, the Vision was roaring into space with the extra thruster pack Tony had built for him, following a beacon that would lead him to Marlin. If everything had worked correctly, it would have just finished refueling Nemo, which would be ready for new coordinates. Tony would most likely be too busy to give them, but the Vision could interface with it and reprogram it to do the other job it had been designed to do, and hopefully save the Brisings.

It was a long flight, twenty-two thousand miles out to a geosynchronous orbit. The Vision did keep an ear on what the others were doing, but his computerized brain was capable of multitasking, and he also devoted some time to thinking about a possible new name for Tiresias. He didn't like calling her Bearer of Ill Tidings. That was a self-fulfilling prophecy. She needed something more positive, something to symbolize a new beginning. Eve seemed too obvious, but it did mean alive in Hebrew, and that might be considered Tiresias' greatest victory, that she was still alive.

These thoughts were interrupted as the Latverian base began firing on the quinjet. Tiresias' view from above was being transmitted to him also, so he could see the explosion and the thunderclouds, and hear Dr. Foster's panic over not knowing what was happening. He quickly saved his train of thought for future reference, and prepared to take action.

“Do you want me to join you on the ground, Captain Rogers?” he asked. It would be a long trip back, and it was doubtful whether he would arrive in time to be of any help, but it would be lax not to try.

“No!” It was Tony who answered. “You stay where you are and do your job. If this is HYDRA trying to get rid of the Brisings, we're gonna need you there.”

“Of course,” said the Vision. That was the more practical response. “It would have been a shame to turn around when I'm almost there.”

He would have hated it, but at least he had the option. Tiresias could not turn around. If she were unwilling to defend herself for fear of harming Earth, then the Avengers were all she had. The Vision was on the side of life and today, if he were lucky, he could save two worlds' worth of it.

Thor's sudden storm was fine for putting out forest fires, but it didn't help people, like Tony, who needed to see heat-seeking missiles coming in order to blow them out of the sky. The clouds obscured visibility and the rain overloaded the suit's motion sensors, so that Tony didn't spot the incoming until it was too late. Over the radio link, he heard the quinjet's proximity alarm. He, Rhodey, and Wilson peeled off in different directions. Natasha and Wanda had parachutes on, and Steve was Captain I-Don't-Need-No-Stinking-Parachute America.

Natasha and Wanda dived out the hatch, and Steve ejected from the cockpit as the missile hit its
target. The quinjet went up in a very expensive fireball, scattering debris over the woods. A bit of flaming wreckage caught Natasha's parachute as it opened. Tony's display zoomed in on her falling down, and he changed direction into a dive to catch her. It looked as if he wouldn't make it, but then Wanda swooped in, surrounding Natasha in a ball of red energy that matched the one levitating herself. Both of them floated gently to the ground.

Tony landed next to them to make sure they were both okay. The pouring rain pattered musically against the metal of the suit.

“Neat new trick you got there, Wanda,” he said.

“The Vision can fly,” said Wanda, “and I can lift objects heavier than myself, so I thought, why shouldn't I?”

“Considering the alternative is falling to your death, I couldn't find a reason,” said Tony.

It didn't take long for the Avengers to regroup. Thor came tramping out of the bushes a few moments later, Rhodey and Wilson landed, and Steve showed up with a couple of leaves stuck to his wet uniform but otherwise perfectly all right. Someday, Tony was going to have to ask him how he did the no-parachute thing. Had the super-soldier serum made him bounce?

“All present and accounted for?” Steve asked.

There was a chorus of agreement.

Steve nodded. “Foster? How do things look from above?”

“I can't tell,” she said. “Thor, can you clear it up a little?”

Everybody glanced up at the clouds, and then heads turned to Thor.

“Apologies,” Thor said. The rain stopped immediately, and the clouds began to clear.

“Now they definitely know who's here,” Tony observed.

“They'll be on their guard,” Steve agreed, “so we're gonna need to be careful.”

“Careful is kind of your area,” Tony said.

“Really?” asked Natasha. “Have you met Rogers?”

Steve thought for a moment. “Okay, stark, Rhodes, and Wilson, you come in from the west and buzz them. Keep their eyes on the sky.” He turned to the women. “Romanov, Maximoff, you're with me. We'll go in from the north side, down the cliff, while everybody runs around trying to defend from the air. If we're caught, Wanda can give them a stern talking-to.” Finally, he pointed at Thor. “You get up into the mountains and keep an eye on the whole area. If we get in trouble we'll call you, but until then, I need you to watch for launches and deal with them when they happen.”

“The missile that can get by the Son of Odin has not yet been forged,” Thor promised.

The group split up and spread out. Thor flew away into the mountains, while Rhodey, Tony, and Sam headed for the compound. Tiresias had been kind enough to send them some pictures of it while they were on their way over – it was a walled base nestled in between two mountains, with a sheer cliff on the north side. That was where Steve and the women would be going in, because it was the last direction HYDRA would expect anyone to come from. Tony wondered if they'd climb down or
if Steve would just jump. Maybe he’d slide down on his shield as if it were a sled.

The walls on the other three sides were thick concrete with barbed wire strung across the tops, patrolled by sentries and studded with squat towers topped by anti-aircraft guns. A few buildings were visible, but most of the base was probably underground. Tony figured it was a cold war holdover, built by people who thought they might need to hide from nuclear attack at any moment. The control centre for the missiles would be behind the cliff, and the actual silos scattered around the surrounding landscape.

As they approached, Tony and Rhodey flew in lower, while Wilson stayed higher up. His EXO-Falcon had a wider turning radius, but could glide to a landing if it were hit. The suits could take more damage, but would drop like rocks if they lost power. The different strengths and weaknesses had to be born in mind.

“Last one in's a rotten egg!” Tony announced, and dropped into a dive to strafe the buildings.

An air raid alarm went off at once. The tops of the towers rumbled open to reveal the large-caliber guns inside. These were practically antiques, and Tony doubted they’d be able to hit something as small as a human being – but then the first bolt of blue energy fired, and Tony realized these were old prototypes fitted with modern targeting equipment.

“Tesseract juice!” he warned the others, dodging just in time.

“Out of the way,” said Rhodey, and fired his own biggest gun at the tower. Masonry sprayed right and left as the Tesseract-powered gun blew up.

“Well, that was fun,” said Tony. “Let's see if we can do it again.”

They flew circles, with Tony and Rhodey taking out the guns while Wilson sniped the operators. All the time, Tony kept one eye out for Steve, Wanda, and Natasha, but couldn’t spot them – not until he saw a sudden flash of red light at the base of the cliff.

“How goes the sneaking-in-subtly?” Tony asked. “You guys need a hand?”

“Stick to air support,” Steve ordered, and Tony heard a thwonk as his shield hit something hard. “Stay up top and watch for launches.” Another thwonk.

“That man never says please,” Tony observed.

“They’ve got a giant vault door cutting off the hallway to the main control centre,” said Natasha. “Wanda, can you open that?”

“I don't know,” Wanda said uncertainly. “I can't see the mechanism, and it's probably very complicated...”

“Don't worry about the mechanism,” said Dr. Foster's voice on the radio. “Remember you kept that globe cool? Cold happens when molecules slow down. Heat is when they speed up. Just melt your way through.”

Tony knocked down another tower, then flew up for another circle of the base. The place was in chaos now, with HYDRA agents running around like ants. A truck had tipped over, spilling glass canisters of Tesseract energy. A man who tried to pick one up was blown to bits by it, leaving a spray of blood across the wall behind him.

“I've found something,” Natasha announced. “There's a map of the silo locations here. I'll send it up,
and you guys can get a head start on taking them out."

Tony assumed she'd meant a computerized map, but apparently it was a physical one, tacked to a wall. Nat took a photograph of it, lit by the ruddy glow of molten metal as Wanda heated up the giant vault door, and emailed it to Tony. FRIDAY mapped it onto the terrain, and passed it on to the displays in Rhodey's helmet and Wilson's goggles. They were gonna have to work out some kind of arrangement for Thor, too, one of these days... it was a pain in the ass not being able to share this kind of information with him.

“We're on it,” said Tony.

The three fliers peeled off in different directions to get started. Tony found his first silo, hidden under the trailing branches of some malnourished fir trees. The big triangular doors were just rolling back as he arrived, dislodging material that had fallen onto them and foliage that had taken root in it during long neglect. The make of missile was familiar – it was the same kind Natasha had stolen for Tony when he needed bombs to send to Brisingr. The USSR had used to provide them to bases in satellite states. It couldn't fly without a gyroscope located in the nose cone. Tony burned that out with a laser, and the silo's location lit up satisfyingly red in FRIDAY's map.

“One down!” he announced.

“Nine to go,” said Rhodey.

Tony moved on to a second, but as he hovered above it, he noticed another door opening in a place where no silo showed on his map. “Romanov,” he said, “I think you missed one!”

“Sorry, I guess it's an old map,” she replied. There was the sound of gunfire.

“Aren't you in yet?” Tony demanded.

“Almost!” said Wanda.

“Now is not a good time to look for updated information, okay?” asked Natasha.

“I'm through!” Wanda announced.

Tony fried the new missile, and then gained some altitude so he'd have a better vantage point as he looked for shaking trees and small avalanches. “FRIDAY, motion sensors,” he said. “Disregard the wind and give me only mechanical.” Dots began to appear in the HUD, and Tony swallowed hard. No way... how could there be that many?

This area appears to be riddled with limestone caves, FRIDAY observed. HYDRA must have adapted them to hold more missiles.

“Shit,” said Tony. “Thunder-Thighs! You're up!”

“Shit,” said Steve, at the exact same moment.

“Wow, is there a bad language echo in this helmet?” asked Tony.

“We should have known HYDRA would pounce on this,” said Steve. “This is exactly what they want – set up a disaster to prove that the world needs guidance, and then step in to provide it. They'll be able to point to this and say look, we can't trust the UN to run things! They may have been planning something like this since the day Brisingr became public knowledge, and we missed all the warning signs because we were so focused on Polyphemus!” The sound of his shield hitting
something was heard again, and there was a distinct possibility it wasn't part of the fighting.

“I hope they're grateful for that,” said Tony. “Polyphemus would have ruined their party, too.”

“Stop the launches!” Steve barked at somebody.

“Too late, Captain America,” sneered a male voice with a thick accent. “In the end, HYDRA always...” he was cut off by yet another thwonk of Vibranium hitting a hard surface, and did not speak again.

The entire mountain began to shake as rocket exhaust welled up out of the silos. FRIDAY brought up the calculations in Tony's display, but he'd already done them in his head on the trip over – it would take about nine hours for the missiles to reach Brisingr. By the time the gravity weapon had to be used, the Earth would have rotated to bring the edge of the Pacific Ring of Fire directly below them. Even if the Dislocator didn't set off the Toba supervolcano, it would still trigger seismic activity and kill millions in some of the most heavily populated regions on Earth.

HYDRA didn't care either way. Human lives were expendable to them, and they definitely wouldn't mind if Tiresias and her Cargo were destroyed... in fact, they'd probably prefer to remove that complicating factor from their equations... which was exactly what they would do, because she'd promised not to defend herself. The ark and its cargo would have crossed millions of light years, only to be blown out of the sky only days from their destination.

Tony wasn't going to let that happen. *I'm sick of watching other people pay for our mistakes*, Steve had once said. Tiresias had suffered for her own mistakes. She shouldn't have to lose what little she had left because of these assholes, especially when she's already gone to such trouble to save it. Tony headed for the nearest missile. Rhodey and Wilson each picked another one and tackled it, and Thor was on his way in, lightning crackling all around him as he swung Mjolnir. Could the four of them possibly get all the missiles before they left the atmosphere.

“Vizh!” he said, punching through the missile's nose to crush the gyroscope. “Tell me you made it!”

“I did,” said the Vision. “The targeting beacon is active, the reactor is live, and all the systems check out. We have found Nemo, and she is ready to perform.”
Reflection

There was very little Tiresias could do while all this happened – she was in her tiny crew compartment on Brisingr, watching it all unfold in the holographic display and listening to people talking on the radio through Sacajawea's translations, which were not always as articulate as Pandora's had been. She was nothing but an observer here, trapped at arm's length from this life-or-death situation, and it gave her time to think about things she really didn't enjoy thinking about.

First there was her own helplessness. Tiresias was so tired of being a spectator to events that involved her intimately, but which she had no power to participate in. She was so tired of feeling helpless... she'd spent millions of years in space in a state of utter helplessness, fast asleep while Pandora steered the ark across the void. Now that they were nearly at their destination, it seemed like she should have been awake and working. She had been working, and at times she'd been working very hard, but all the most important things had been happening either on Earth or where Polyphemus was, millions of miles away. All she could do was watch.

Tiresias had tried so many times to take her fate back into her own hands, and she'd failed every time. Her attempt to deal with Polyphemus alone had bee disastrous – she'd had to sit back and watch while Jane Foster did it for her. Now here she was again, watching while the Avengers tried to protect her from their own people... only this time it wasn't that she was incapable of doing it herself, it was that if she did, she'd only kill more innocents.

All her life Tiresias had tried to be self-sufficient. Even when she'd been part of a living, functioning world, she'd always worked alone. The lone genius, changing the world with her discoveries – a romantic figure, the type in the stories grandparents told. Now here she was, more alone than she'd ever been, and what she most wanted was help.

Maybe help was what Tiresias had needed the whole time, and she just hadn't wanted to admit it. She certainly hadn't needed any help getting herself into this mess, so she'd figured she shouldn't need any to get out of it again. But she'd needed help with Polyphemus, and now as the Earthlings tried again to destroy her – and who could blame them, really? – she needed help again.

“Tiresias,” the Vision said, bringing her back to the moment. “Are you still watching?”

“Of course I am,” she said quickly, “but I'm not sure what's going on anymore. What is HYDRA?”

“HYDRA is the organization responsible for launching the missiles,” the Vision explained. “They have no quarrel against you, necessarily, but they hope to prove that humans are inherently irresponsible and a single totalitarian government is necessary to rein in our destructive tendencies. They will force you to fire on Earth, and use the resulting deaths as an excuse to take the world under their protection.”

“This... is is my bad,” said Stark. “We told them you would hurt people in order to deter the UN from doing this, and instead HYDRA went oh, we can use that!”

“It's not our fault,” Jane Foster told him. “Oppenheimer built the bomb, but Truman decided to drop it.”

“Thanks for the analogy.” Stark's voice was thick with sarcasm. “That makes me feel much better.”

“That makes no sense,” Tiresias protested. Maybe it was just a poor translation, but she couldn't figure out how one of these things was supposed to lead to another. “If they're the ones who fired the
missiles against all advice, doesn't that only prove that they don't care about protecting your world?"

“They have already made arrangements to blame it on a group of ‘insurgents,’” said the Vision.

That still seemed entirely unreasonable. Anybody who would do such a thing ought to know that they weren't protecting anybody! Then again, Tiresias herself had thought she was protecting people when she'd tried to take on Polyphemus alone, and she'd seen how that had turned out. “I will not fire on your world,” she said firmly. “You helped me when you had every reason not to trust me. I won't repay your kindness with destruction.”

The first time Tiresias had realized she might lose everything she had left, that she might have to give up the ark and its Cargo in order to save these alien creatures from the threat she'd created, it had nearly crushed her. She'd wanted to curl into a ball and never move again. Now, confronting the idea again, there was only a resigned calm. Maybe she'd truly accepted it at last. Her world had ended a long time ago. There were some mistakes that just couldn't be taken back. It was time to let go.

But then the Vision spoke again. “You won't have to,” he promised, and although Tiresias couldn't see his face, she could hear the smile in his voice. “Thore, Stark, and Rhodes are going to stop as many missiles as they can from leaving the atmosphere. Any that make it to an altitude of two hundred thousand feet, we can destroy without doing any help to the Earth at all. I'm setting up a transmitter to tell you where to aim.”

Sacajawea registered a signal coming in, and Tiresias brought up a holographic display showing the positions of Earth, the Moon, Brisingr, and a point in space where the beacon was coming from. She asked for a magnified image of what was there, and realized it was partially familiar.

“That's the satellite you went to Jupiter,” she said. Humans gave strange names to things, but she quite liked the one they'd assigned to the largest, most turbulent planet in their solar system. It meant Father of the Sky-Gods. What a wonderful name for such an object!

“I'm afraid it's time to tell yet another secret,” the Vision said apologetically. “Nemo was designed initially not to attack Polyphemus, but in case we had to attack you. We fitted it with equipment that we hoped would be able to reflect the gravity waves from your weapon. If you fire on the beacon, Nemo should be able to re-direct the wave and destroy the oncoming missiles without causing problems on the ground. If it fails, all we will lose is the satellite itself.”

Sacajawea's translations were sometimes clumsy, but in this case it was good enough for Tiresias to pick out the turns of phrase he'd chosen. “Should and if,” she said.

“We've had no opportunity to test it,” said the Vision. “We can't generate gravity waves. Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig had some limited experience with an approximately similar phenomenon, and we used their data. There is no reason I'm aware of why it shouldn't work.”

If it didn't work, the missiles would destroy all or part of the ark. It wasn't as if Tiresias had anything to gain by refusing. “Are you sure nobody will be hurt by this?”

“I promise,” he said. “It will not claim so much as a single human life.”

She nodded. “When do you want to fire?”

“The exact time and angle will depend on how many missiles leave the atmosphere,” said the Vision. “I will let you know.”

There'd been sixteen missiles launched – only HYDRA, Tony thought, could even have that many –
so three Avengers weren't going to get them all. They were definitely going to try, though.

“Four!” Thor declared, as a rocket dropped to crash in the forest far below. Tony was going to have to send some people in there to clean up the bits. Nobody wanted uranium 235 just lying around in the woods of eastern Europe. That was a good way to end up with three-eyed, glow-in-the-dark squirrels or something.

“Yeah, you work hard to keep that head start,” said Rhodey. “You're gonna need it!” He roared higher into the sky after another missile. They had to work quickly now. The air was thin up here, and the suits weren't sealed for space travel. In a few minutes, Tony and Rhodey at least would have to turn back. Thor might be able to go a little higher, but even the mighty Son of Odin couldn't go longer than three or four minutes without oxygen.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, it's not a contest!” Tony managed to grab a ladder rung projecting from another missile – this would be his third – and began climbing towards the nose cone. This would probably have to be his last one. It was getting hard to breathe.

“Yeah, you only say that because you're in third place,” said Rhodey.

“I'm not in third, I'm tied for second,” Tony corrected him. “Or I would be, if it were a contest. It's not a contest.”

“Yeah? What if you had four and we had two each?” Rhodey asked.

“Well, then it would be a contest, obviously!” Tony told him. He paused to breathe deeply. Climbing was making his shoulders ache – the limited oxygen supply meant his muscles were building up lactic acid. That was going to sting tomorrow. “FRIDAY, what's our altitude?”

Twenty-five thousand feet, the computer replied.

“Aw, we haven't even hit the summit of Everest yet!” said Tony. “Come on, how many more can we get?”

He tried to start climbing again, only to find that he couldn't move his left hand.

Tony looked down. The gap between the rungs and the rocket was meant to be just big enough for fingers to get through without compromising the aerodynamic shape of the missile. It was not designed to be clung to by an oxygen-starved man in an Iron Man suit. His fingers had slipped in too deeply, and the narrow rung had gotten wedged in the joint at the base of them.

He tugged on it, but it didn't want to move. Firing the repulsors wouldn't free it – his hand was facing in the wrong direction. As stars began to come out in the sky above him, Tony wedged his boots against the side of the rocket and pulled harder. Destroying the missile was no longer his priority. It would just have to keep going up and the gravity wave detector would hopefully get it. Tony had to get himself unstuck before he ran out of air.

Thirty thousand feet, said FRIDAY.

“Working on it!” Tony paused for another deep breath, then disconnected the gauntlet from the rest of the suit and tried to just yank his hand out of it. With the rung stuck in the joint, however, he couldn't straighten his fingers, and the metal dug into his flesh until he yelped out loud. He was going soft, he thought. With the constant ache of the arc reactor gone, he'd lost his pain tolerance.

Again, he stopped to close his eyes and take a few deep breaths, trying to get more oxygen into his blood. Passing out – or freaking out, if he thought too hard about how similar this was to being stuck
underwater in a leaking suit while the debris of his house fell on top of him – wouldn't do him any good. He had to stay awake and not panic. If he didn't get himself unstuck, he would lose consciousness and just hang there until he died of oxygen deprivation, or be disintegrated when the gravity wave hit. Neither of those were ways Tony was willing to die. When Tony Stark died, he would die as a hero saving the world, not as an idiot who got stuck to a missile.

Try again. He wiggled his fingers, trying to force them out. There had to be a way he could do this without ripping his hand off. Pull harder. Find the right angle. Tony was starting to see spots, bright yellow flashes dancing against a world that was fading off into a uniform gray.

Forty thousand feet.

The voice made Tony blink in confusion. Maybe it was the lack of air, but it didn't sound right. “JARVIS?” he asked. “Is that you?”

Sir?

“JARVIS,” Tony repeated. His head was spinning, and there wasn't much voice left in him. “Help me.”

Then the gray swallowed him up.

JARVIS had saved Tony's life many times. Once he'd become part of Iron Man, Tony's safety had been JARVIS' primary function, above and beyond all else. The Vision knew that, because quite a bit of that code was still a part of him. So were the protocols that controlled the Iron Man suits – and when Tony said help me, both sets of programming leaped into action.

It was a simple task to over-ride FRIDAY and take control of the suit. First the Vision checked Tony's vitals. The readings weren't good – he was rapidly running out of oxygen as the missile ascended, but not yet to the point of irreversible brain damage. There was still time.

He disconnected the other gauntlet from the suit and used its rockets to wedge it into the rung of the ladder and twist. The metal bent, and then broke, and Tony's limp body dropped as the missile continued up. It was now fifty thousand feet to the mountains below.

The Vision slipped out of the suit's circuitry again, letting the autopilot come back online – FRIDAY would now send Tony back to the place where the quinjet had crashed. At the speed of light, the focus of the Vision's consciousness was back in space, monitoring the oncoming missiles.

“Not yet,” he told Tiresias. “Almost.”

Thor, Rhodes, and Stark had destroyed nine of the missiles between them, but that left seven still on their way, heading for Brisingr's infra-red signal. The Vision moved behind Nemo's dish for a better angle to access the satellite's CPU. He had promised Tiresias that even a failure would not claim any human lives, and he'd meant it. After all, the Vision himself was not human.

“Stark! Rhodes! Thor!” he heard Captain Rogers' voice on the radio. “I need you guys down here. We gotta round up all these HYDRA guys before they scatter into the woods.”

“Just a sec,” said Rhodes. “I'm looking for Tony. Thor, you see him?”

“I fear not,” Thor said. “It would take the eyes of Heimdall to see something so small at such a distance.”
“Tony is fine,” said the Vision. “He is unconscious, but FRIDAY is returning him to the quinjet crash site to wait for you. Go help the others.”

“Thank god,” said Rhodes, and then added, “no offense.”

“None taken, James of Rhodes,” Thor replied.

The missiles were still climbing. They reached eighty thousand feet, and then a hundred. This was above the altitude they were designed to operate at, but a lack of air was no impediment to a nuclear reaction. Their engines had run out of fuel and they were coasting, gently slowing in Earth’s gravitational field, but with plenty of speed left to reach Brisingr before they detonated.

“Halfway there,” the Vision told Tiresias. He double-checked the equipment on Nemo. All functional.

“I'm watching,” she replied.

A hundred and twenty thousand feet. A hundred and forty.

“If this doesn't work, will you be all right?” asked Tiresias, but she answered the question herself before he could speak. “Oh, of course you will. You'll just dematerialize and let the gravity wave pass through you.”

“Precisely,” said the Vision, but it was a lie. He was here to operate the equipment. Tony could have done it remotely, but Tony was no longer in a condition to do so. It would have to be the Vision who turned on the gravity reflector. If he told Tiresias that, however, she might refuse to use the Dislocator, and would be destroyed. The Vision's life alone was less important than the lives of all the embryos aboard Brisingr. As Dr. Selvig had quoted from Star Trek: the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few... or the one.

A hundred and sixty thousand feet.

The needs of the many... that was exactly what Wanda had been thinking, the Vision suddenly realized. She had never been suicidal. She had never been hoping to reunite with her brother in some hypothetical afterlife. She merely thought her one life was less important than those of billions of humans and Brisingings. He hadn't believed it at the time, but in the end she'd been right about everything else: it was her and Jane Foster who had saved the Earth from Polyphemus.

A hundred and eighty thousand feet.

“Almost there,” the Vision said. “Wanda, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” her voice replied over the radio. “You're not allowed to say goodbye,” she added. “You're not going to die.”

“I' not planning on it,” said the Vision. “But I do want to apologize for doubting your motivations. You are very much a hero, Wanda, and I... I am very attached to you emotionally. Perhaps more than is logical. You were among the first to treat me as anything but a curiosity.’”

The radio connection hissed with the sound of an explosion.

“I love you, too, but maybe we can talk about it when I'm not trying to shield everybody from HYDRA weapons,” Wanda suggested.

Love... was that really what he felt for her? There was no time to sort it out now, though. The
missiles were at a hundred and ninety-five thousand feet. So all he said was, “of course. Tiresias, you may fire now.”

The Vision saw the sensors spike as the gravity weapon fired. Quickly, he calibrated the anomaly creators and rotated the dish. The angle would have to be exactly right, the beam focused precisely, so that there would be no damage to Earth. He had only a couple of seconds to do it – and then the wave hit. The satellite groaned and warped as the space around it distorted, condensed, and then bounced back the way it had come.

The stars above and the Earth below seemed to ripple like a reflection in the surface of a pond as the fabric of the universe bent. The edge of the atmosphere shimmered, and the remaining missiles, one by one, dispersed into clouds of hot atoms. The Vision counted the puffs of disintegrating matter: four... five... six... and then it was over. Nemo had functioned perfectly, and the threat was neutralized.

“It appears we have succeeded,” said the Vision, pleased. “My compliments to Dr. Selvig.”

“Oh, no,” Dr. Selvig said. “I designed the things to detect gravitational anomalies. It was Jane who retooled them.”

“My compliments to Dr.Foster as well, then,” the Vision said. “I will return to Earth – and Tiresias, you may continue on your way to Venus.”

“Will I be allowed to get there?” she asked anxiously.

“We will do our utmost,” the Vision replied. He could not promise, any more than she'd been able to promise Tony he would not regret helping her. Maybe, if nothing else, this fiasco would have helped the UN Security Council to see reason.

Jane heard the Vision's congratulations, and it should have made her want to celebrate, but she was honestly just too tired. She managed a soft “woo-hoo,” and then tried to lean back – only to remember that she was sitting not on a chair, but on a rolling stool. She ended up leaning all the way back and lying awkwardly with her lower back on the seat and her arms and legs hanging as she stared at the ceiling.

“I meant to do that,” she announced, knowing Darcy and Eric wouldn't believe her.

“Of course you did,” said Darcy. “Congrats – what is this, your third time to save the world?”

“Her fourth,” said Thor over the radio. “Had she not inspired me with the desire to protect your realm, I would never have been able to regain my powers and defeat the Destroyer.”

“Nice!” Darcy nodded. “Quadruple congratulations!”

Jane lay there a few moments longer then began to ponder getting up. Just sitting up from this half-hanging position, she decided, would be too much effort. Instead, she rolled off the stool onto her hands and knees and picked herself up from there, her head spinning a little as the blood that had rushed to her head flowed out of it again.

“We should turn on the television,” she decided. “See how the media manages to turn this into bad news.”

Darcy brought up a holoscreen – these had been hard to work with their first few weeks at Avengers HQ, but now they were as intuitive as using the touchscreen on a phone – and asked FRIDAY for
the news feed. Several channels popped up, showing protests and parties happening in various places around the country and around the world, and Jane stared blankly at them for a moment. She had to wonder if this would ever really end. It had been months now since Darcy had first asked about the smudge in one of Jane's images of the gravitational lens she wanted to study, months since they'd noticed both Brisingr and Polyphemus. At the time they'd thought the Avengers would just blow up the oncoming comet and the whole thing would be over. Now here they were after months of panic, politics, trial and error – lots of error – and it still wasn't over yet! Every exhausting victory had brought them a new list of challenges.

Jane chose the channel showing the party in Times Square, still going on as the sun was rising, and enlarged the image. The audio came on with it. Last night, people had been dancing to REM's *It's the End of the World as we Know It*. Today, surprisingly, the choice of music was Johnny Nash's *I Can See Clearly Now*. People were pouring cheap champagne, she realized, and car horns were blaring. The atmosphere was one of celebration.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a startled reporter was saying. “Word is coming in that the Brisings have managed to destroy the oncoming missiles without doing any harm to the Earth! This is an astonishing act of mercy from the creatures who created both the gravity weapon and the...”

She was cut off by a joyful whoop as a man wearing absolutely nothing but a red and black hood ran past her, waving his arms in the air and yelling wordlessly as he vanished into the crowd. All Jane really got to see of the streaker was a back and buttocks covered in scars.

The reporter stood there in shock a moment, then collected herself. “Um, as I was saying,” she began, only to be interrupted again as a man came up and handed her an index card. She looked at what was scribbled on it, and her eyes grew even wider. “Well! According to this,” she said, “the Avengers are in touch with the US Embassy in Warsaw, Poland! They have the group responsible for the nuclear launch in custody. These are apparently a cell of the organization known as HYDRA!”

“Looks like the Avengers are gonna be back in everybody's good graces tomorrow,” Darcy observed, smiling.

“Yeah.” Jane sighed heavily, and shut her eyes. It was too early yet to be properly relieved, but so far this seemed to be turning out okay. “There's probably gonna be more debate about the Brisings, but maybe people will finally realize they're not as bad as all that.”

“We can only hope,” Eric agreed. “Jane, I know I say this so often that you've probably learned to block it out, but... you really look like you need some sleep.”

“I have,” Jane agreed, “but for once I think I'm gonna listen to you.”

Hours later, while Jane was still sleeping, Tony woke up.

He tried to roll over, only to find he was tied to a bed – which immediately set off panic bells in his head. His heart began pounding as he looked around, trying to figure out where he was and how he’d gotten there. A white room filled with dim, dark figures and murmuring voices... was he dead? If so, he was pretty sure he wasn't about to be welcomed by an angel...

“Good morning,” said a familiar voice.

Tony's eyes managed to focus, and he made out a red face, a yellow gem, and blue eyes... the Vision.
He was in a hospital room. The shapes he could see were the Vision and a nurse who was checking machines. The voices were a foreign-language program playing on a television, and Tony's head hurt way too much for him to be dead. Somehow he must have gotten off the missile and survived the fall back to... hadn't he done that before?

“Deja vu,” he muttered, letting his head drop back onto the pillow. He wasn't actually tied to the bed, but his left arm was elevated, with a number of stitches across the top of his palm – that was what had been tying him down. “Hey, Vizh. Two questions: where am I and where is everybody else?”

“You are in the Czerniakowski Hospital in Warsaw,” the Vision replied. “The others are busy delivering the HYDRA operatives to Interpol. You were unconscious for about four hours,” he explained, “but then slept for another fourteen. Nobody wanted to wake you.”

“Wish you had,” Tony grumbled. If he'd awakened sooner, maybe his head wouldn't have been aching like this. “What happened? The last thing I remember is my hand getting stuck in the ladder.” He must have gotten it out somehow. Why couldn't he think how?

“I took control of the suit and wedged the rung open with the other gauntlet,” said the Vision. “Then FRIDAY flew you back to Earth on autopilot.”

“Wedge the...” Tony pictured it, then groaned and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. It was such an obvious solution, why hadn't he thought of it himself? Why had he just braced himself and pulled instead of doing something intelligent? “Apparently, I'm an idiot.”

“You were suffering from oxygen deprivation,” said the Vision. “It impaired your brain function.”

That didn't really make Tony feel better. “Eh, I didn't need those neurons anyway,” he said. “Thanks for the hand, by the way. Being torn apart by a gravity wave doesn't sound like a fun way to go.” It seemed like the natural thing to say, but part of Tony still couldn't believe he was saying it. The old Tony Stark, the one who hadn't yet been to Afghanistan, had simply never bothered.

“You would have suffocated long before that,” said the Vision, “but you're welcome.” He turned to look out the window for a moment at the trees and apartment buildings across the street. The sky was blue outside, and a soft wind was ruffling red and yellow autumn leaves. Strange, Tony thought, how such cataclysmic events could happen, and yet the sun still rose and set, and plants carried on photosynthesizing like there was nothing wrong in the world.

“I think you ought to know,” the Vision suddenly spoke again. “It wasn't me who saved you. JARVIS' protocols, which dictate that your life must be preserved above all else, are still a part of me. Those algorithms knew exactly how to save you, and all I did was follow their instructions.” He reached out and took Tony's hand. It was a surprisingly intimate gesture, the one JARVIS would probably have performed if he could. “The day I was born, I said I was not JARVIS, but there is more of him in me than I thought.”

Tony shook his head. “Nah, you're not JARVIS,” he said with a sigh. “JARVIS is dead. I'm sorry if he's kind of hanging around haunting you, that's not what I was going for.” There, he'd said it. JARVIS is dead. He'd said it and now he could move on. “So yeah. Thank you for saving me, Vision.”

“You're welcome,” the Vision replied.
Some Words to the Wise

It was not until two days after the Latverian Incident that the Avengers arrived home – Pepper had made Captain Rogers promise that Tony wouldn't leave the hospital until he had a clean bill of health. The others, meanwhile, had to politely decline a thank-you reception from the President of Latveria, who was probably trying to build up international goodwill against his next human rights violation. Then they had to arrange transportation, and avoid the throngs of reporters and protestors who wanted to block their way to the airport – all things considered, it made the Vision very glad he could fly under his own power. He left early, and arrived back hours ahead of the others.

It was raining again when he landed on the lawn, cold October rain that rustled the autumn foliage, so the people waiting to greet him were huddled in the doorway to stay dry. These were Dr. Selvig and Dr. Foster.

“Good to have your feet back on the ground?” Dr. Selvig asked.

“Very much so,” the Vision agreed. “I hope I won't have to leave again soon. Space is full of wonders, but it tends to make one feel very insignificant.”

“That's what I like best about space,” Jane said, as they headed inside together. “It puts everything in perspective. I look up at the stars and I can't believe how vast the universe is and how tiny I am, and yet the really amazing thing is that even though I'm such a tiny mote in the middle of it all, I can start to understand how the whole thing works! Isn't that wonderful?” she asked.

“It is,” the Vision agreed. “Both that the universe is simple enough to be understood, and that we are complex enough to understand it.”

Darcy was waiting inside, holding a towel. “You soaked, Robo-Bro?” she asked, offering it to the Vision.

“Thank you, Miss Lewis, I am quite all right,” he replied, and phased out. The water fell through him into a puddle on the floor, and he re-solidified above it.

“Aw, man!” said Darcy. “I wish I could do that!”

“I want to hear about Jupiter,” Jane said firmly. “We've obviously had probes there, but you're the first real person who's been and you must have made all kinds of observations. The coffee's hot, you can tell us all about it!” She took his arm to urge him on to the kitchen.

He, however, hung back a moment. “Dr. Foster,” he said. “I wondered if I might have a brief word with you in private, first.”

Jane's smile dropped away at once, to be replaced by an expression of anxiety, and the Vision realized he'd frightened her. With all that had happened, she probably thought that yet another problem had cropped up. “Oh... yes,” she said. “Of course. Darcy, Eric, you guys wanna go on ahead?”

“We'll meet you in the kitchen,” said Dr. Selvig. He took Miss Lewis' arm. “Now, Darcy,” he said, as they rounded a corner, “when you say you have a secret recipe for brownies...”

Dr. Foster waited until they were alone, and then took a deep breath, steeling herself for the worst. “All right,” she said. “What's the bad news?”
“There's no bad news,” he promised. “I'm sorry if I frightened you. Actually, what I wanted to ask was, what does love feel like?”

Jane stared at him in what appeared to be quite honest shock, and then she laughed for a moment before quickly quieting herself. “I'm sorry,” she said, “I just... it's not that it's funny, it's just that out of all the things you could have asked me, that was about the last one I was expecting. Um...” she swallowed, and took a moment to force her expression to be serious.

“I'm not offended,” said the Vision. “It's a strange question, I know.” He'd decided to ask Jane partially because of the humans closest to him, she seemed the least likely to tease him for it later – and because she was a scientist, and could perhaps explain it in a way that did not make assumptions about what the Vision did or did not already know about human emotion.

“Well, yeah,” she said. “Uh... I read somewhere once that love activates the neurotransmitters dopamine, serotonin, and oxycodone. Dopamine is associated with reward-motivation behaviour, serotonin is involved with feelings of happiness and satisfaction, and oxycodone eases pain and can induce euphoria...”

“Is that what you think about when you're with Thor?” asked the Vision.

Jane laughed again, her face flushing bright red. “No, actually, it's not... that's just... I looked it up,” she said, as if confessing a deep dark secret. “When I was in high school, because I had a crush and I wanted to know how to get rid of it because it was making things really, really awkward. I learned that there isn't a cure for being in love. You just have to get over it.”

That was not the answer the Vision had expected at all. Maybe Dr. Foster hadn't been the appropriate person to ask. “Do you consider love a disease, then?”

“No!” said Jane. “Oh, no... no, I'm really not the person to ask about this. I don't know anything about love! This is...” she giggled again. “This is about Wanda, right?”

It was common knowledge that Wanda and the Vision were close friends, so perhaps it should not have surprised the Vision that Jane guessed immediately. Then again, perhaps it should have. Humans considered friendship a different type of affection from romantic love and compartmentalized the two very strongly. If it were that obvious to Jane, was it that obvious to everybody? What if he didn't love Wanda, but she thought he did because of the way he'd been behaving?

Jane was waiting for an answer, though, so he couldn't dwell on it now. “I am very fond of Wanda,” the Vision said. “I value her company and I have learned to respect her powers and intuitions, but I don't know if I'm a fit romantic partner for a human.” Could he satisfy her emotionally and physically? Ultron had not designed his body for that, nor had such things been a part of JARVIS' programming. Could the Vision truly be more than the sum of those parts?

“I think... I think you're gonna need to talk to Wanda about that,” said Jane. “That's the one thing I know I can tell you, honestly: if you like her, you have to talk to her about it. When I wanted Thor to know I liked him, I showed him,” she explained. “There we were, and he'd just saved everybody in town and was about to disappear back to Asgard, so I ran up and kissed him. Except don't do that to Wanda,” she added quickly, as if afraid the Vision would run off to do so then and there. “At least, not without asking her if you're allowed. Just talk to her. And promise me you'll never ask me a question like that ever again. Ever. Okay?”

She was not offended, either, only awkward. It must be true what people said, the Vision thought – nobody knew anything about love. In that case, perhaps the Vision did not have a handicap. “Very
well,” he said with a smile. “I promise.”

It was Stark and Pepper who'd met Jane at the airport back in the summer, when she'd flown from the Canaries to meet the Avengers in New York. Now it was Jane, Pepper, and the Vision who were there to meet the Avengers when their chartered plane landed at JFK. Jane didn't know how she expected Stark to look after he'd apparently nearly died of oxygen deprivation, but he walked into the terminal looking perfectly happy and healthy except for his bandaged hand, which still had some stitches in it.

When he saw Pepper his face lit up with a dazzling smile and he opened his arms for her. Pepper hugged him and kissed his cheek, and murmured something in his ear. Whatever it was, Stark reacted by tightening his arms around her and closing his eyes as he buried his face in the crook of her neck. It was so tender, and so unlike the Tony Stark Jane remembered seeing on television, that watching it felt a bit like an invasion of privacy.

When Thor arrived, Jane stepped forward to greet him, but then hesitated as she noticed the Vision watching intently. What was he taking from this? Was he going to imitate Jane and Pepper when he greeted Wanda? She hoped not – surely he must know that sort of affection wasn't acceptable if people weren't already in a relationship! Was he just studying their behaviour for later reference?

They were about to find out – Wanda was crossing the jetbridge. She smiled when she saw Stark and Pepper, and nodded to Jane and Thor, but then her gaze drifted. Perhaps she was remembering her brother, and feeling lonely that there was nobody there to greet her.

The Vision stepped forward. “Hello, Wanda,” he said.

“Hello, Vision,” she replied.

Jane knew it was rude, but she had to watch. She had to know where this was going, even if the secondhand embarrassment made her want to duck under Thor's cape and hide – which it just might.

The Vision offered a hand. Wanda took it, and he very gallantly raised it to his lips and kissed it. Then he said, “it may be too late to ask this, but are we in a romantic relationship?”

Jane quickly turned around and hugged Thor, because burying her face between his pecs was the only way she wasn't going to laugh out loud.

“What do you mean, are we?” asked Wanda. Jane couldn't see her face, but she could picture the blankly confused expression that must have been on it. “Oh, you mean... oh, that!” She laughed awkwardly. “That was... that was a joke. We were busy and there was no time for apologizing, but I do accept your apology,” she added. “You were trying to look after me. I just don't need looking after.”

“I will remember that,” the Vision said. When Jane turned around again, she found that he had dropped Wanda's hand and was now standing up straight, head lowered. “I apologize also, for misconstruing your words.”

He glanced at Jane, but she just shrugged. This was up to him and Wanda, and if it got all weird or went horribly wrong, Jane didn't want to take the blame. The Vision gave a slight nod, and turned to Wanda again.

“It's good to be clear. We are not in a relationship,” he said. “Unless, of course, you would like to be.”
Wanda was startled. “Is that how it's done in America?” she asked. “Do people have to ask each other's permission? That's not the impression I got from television.” Now it was her turn to look at Jane for help. Jane shook her head again.

“No, it's not traditional,” said the Vision. “I only wanted to be sure. We can stay friends if you prefer, but I wouldn't be adverse to becoming an 'item'. We could try a dinner date,” he suggested. “I don't require food, but I'd be happy to treat you to a meal, if you'd like.”

“You can eat,” Wanda objected. “Or at least, you can drink – I've seen you drink coffee.”

“I can, but I don't need to,” the Vision explained. “If we go to a restaurant, I can eat for appearance's sake.”

“I think if we went to a restaurant it would... people would stare,” said Wanda carefully. “Maybe we should stay in. I can cook,” she offered. “I'll treat you... or I could teach you to cook, and we can treat each other.”

“Teach me to cook?” the Vision asked, but then he smiled. “That sounds lovely.”

Jane had to turn away again. “That is going to be a disaster,” she whispered as she gave Thor another hug. “If Wanda learned about American relationships from TV, she might actually know less than he does.”

“In that case, they are well-matched,” Thor murmured back. He took her arm to follow Stark and Pepper towards the coffee shop in the terminal.

“They've got nothing in common,” Jane said.

“Neither do we,” Thor pointed out.

He probably had a point there, she thought. He was a superhuman being from another plane of existence, who had once been worshipped as a god. She was an Israeli-American atheist and an academic. If the two of them could make things work, at least most of the time, then maybe the Vision and Wanda could, too. There was certainly no harm in them trying it.

While the Avengers reunited at Headquarters, the UN Security Council was back in session. When Jane sat down in front of the TV to catch up on what had been happening, she found a reporter interviewing her old friend, the delegate with the British accent.

“What is on the table today?” the reporter asked.

“Well, we're back to the same old questions,” the man grumbled. “We've lost our only chance to make a show of force, and now we have to find another solution.”

Jane's knee-jerk reaction was to roll her eyes and fake pity for him: poor baby, forced to find a grownup solution after his toys got taken away! Then she suddenly reconsidered... if she felt like this had been going on forever, other people must, too. The Security Council, for all they'd made some terrible decisions, must be as sick of it as anybody else. Jane just hoped they'd see sense now. They couldn't possibly keep thinking the Brisings were a threat, not after the aliens had avoided retaliating against a direct attack.

Science and politics weren't really all that different, she thought. You couldn't come to conclusions in either arena unless you had all the facts, and new facts could force you to re-evaluate your entire worldview. And making decisions based on wrong information could lead only to disaster.
To Jane's frustration and disappointment, they did not come to a decision that day. Nor did it happen the next day, or the day after that, and Jane began to wonder why they were bothering. The point would be moot soon, anyway. In only a few more weeks, Brisingr would settle into orbit around Venus and the colonization would begin. Even if the Security Council decided the aliens couldn't have the planet, what did they intend to do about it?

Wednesday afternoon found Jane, Pepper, and Wanda trying to agree on something to watch on Netflix. Time seemed to be crawling more and more slowly the longer they waited for word, and it got more and more difficult to find ways to occupy themselves. They were trying to decide between a romantic comedy and a documentary on Edinburgh Castle when Darcy burst into the room.

“News!” she declared.

Jane sat up eagerly. “What's it say?” she asked. “Was there an actual decision, or is it just a rumour?”

The magazine Darcy was holding didn't look like the sort of publication that would report on an upcoming UN decision – not with a picture of a woman in an evening gown on the cover.

“Oh, no, not that news.” Darcy plopped herself on the sofa between Jane and Wanda and opened her magazine. “But they mention you, and your Nobel Prize! Listen to this.” She cleared her throat. “Official Avengers press pictures have been released showing Nobel Prize-Winner Dr. Jane Foster and Sokovian sorceress Wendy Maximoff...”

“Wendy?!” Wanda protested.

“... being dropped off on top of Avengers Tower in full Aesir regalia,” Darcy continued. “Asgardian couture is expected to be hot on the runways of Europe this fall, and rumor has it that top designers are already looking into Indian silks and Swarovski crystals for lines of Asgardian-inspired...”

“Stop!” Jane ordered, and shut her eyes. “I hate everything.”

Wanda passed the popcorn.

“Think of it this way,” Pepper suggested. “You've become a trendsetter – that's good. It means you're influential.”

“Can't I be influential for something other than what I wear?” Jane asked. “Can't I start a trend of women deciding they care more about how the universe works than what colour their lipstick is?”

“People can care about both, you know,” said Darcy indignantly. She smacked her lips. “The Body Shop, colour crush pearlescent Red Hot Raspberry!”

“Chanel #19 Gabrielle,” Pepper said.

Wanda looked embarrassed. “I got mine at Walgreen's.”

“That's okay, I'm wearing Burt's Bees,” sighed Jane. This was it, wasn't it? The stupid Security Council was never going to decide but and Jane Foster would be remembered as Thor's girlfriend and a failed fashion icon. Maybe she could start a renaissance for the 90's flannel look.

Actual news came out of nowhere at six PM that night. Jane and a number of other people who lived at Avengers HQ were sitting in the kitchen eating Chinese takeout and watching television on a holoscreen, just in case something important happened. So far, nothing much had, or at least nothing relevant. An explosion had destroyed the Pym Technologies building in San Francisco. The Navy
was dealing with a scandal after a high-ranking officer had been caught selling answers to the promotional exams. Scientists at the Large Hadron Collider believed they may have created a particle called a zino. Astronomers were watching in surprise and delight as the loss of Europa altered the structure of Jupiter's rings.

Normally Jane would not have cared about the first two stories, but would have hung on every word of the latter two. Right now, she had no patience for any of them. What was wrong with the world? Why couldn't people just get on with things.

Then it happened. “And now,” the anchorman announced, “we take you to our biggest breaking story of the evening. The UN Security Council has an announcement to make regarding the aliens known as the Brisings.”

Jane sat up so sharply she spilled sweet and sour chicken across the table. She did not bother to clean it up – suddenly her eyes were glued to the transparent display floating in front of her.

The trees were in full fall colours now, and the line of flags fluttered in a stiff, chilly breeze. Reporters crowded around to cover the event were in sweaters and knitted hats, and the man mounting the podium to talk was shivering in the relatively thin fabric of his suit jacket, his combover flapping in the wind.

“Him again,” Jane grumbled, not even surprised. “Shouldn't this guy have been exposed as a HYDRA sympathizer or something by now? Nobody could possibly be that obnoxious just because it's their personality!”

“Tony exists,” remarked Colonel Rhodes.

“Beat me to it,” said Pepper.

As the camera zoomed in on the man, Jane saw that he looked pale and uncomfortable, with heavy dark circles under his eyes that even his thick, black-rimmed glasses couldn't completely hide. He'd probably had a very stressful week, which made Jane feel sorry for him again – for about four seconds. Then she thought back to all the anxiety and annoyance he'd caused her with his interruptions and grillings during her presentations, and decided he deserved every moment of what he got back.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press,” he said. “After consultation with the world's leading scientists and reviewing everything currently known about the beings we call the Brisings...”

Both things they'd done months ago, Jane thought sourly.

“... we have come to a decision. As Venus is the collective property of the people of Earth, we have no authority to relinquish our claim on it without permission from every single human being.”

“Oh, that's bullshit!” Jane burst out.

Several people shushed her. “He's not done,” said Darcy.

As it turned out, he wasn't – and what he said next didn't exactly make Jane happy, but it was better than what she'd feared he was going to say.

“We therefore feel that the people of Earth should derive some benefit from the Brisings living on their land. While we haven't yet had an opportunity to work out the details with the Brisings themselves, we plan to come to some arrangement whereby they may lease the planet Venus. A special subset of the council will be nominated as the Brisings Committee," he went on, “responsible
for decision-making and communications with our new neighbours. Hopefully we can come to a lease agreement within the next year. The process of making the agreement with the Brisings will happen in full view of the public, who deserve to know the details. I will now take questions.”

Hands shot up throughout the audience in a hubbub of shouting and bids for attention – the viewing audience was denied the chance to hear the questions, though, as the shot cut back to the newsroom.

“There is no information yet about who will be on the Brisings Committee,” the anchorman said, “but Councilor Cranmer has specified that he will not be a member, as he will be retiring soon for the sake of his health.”

Jane threw her hands up in the air. “Lease the planet? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!” she complained.

“Really?” asked the Vision. “I thought the duck sounded fairly ridiculous.”

“You didn’t even meet him,” said Wanda. She was sitting on the Vision’s knee, Jane observed, so something had to be going right, there.

“Really,” Jane affirmed. “Including Howard and everything else that’s happened. It’s dumb.” She pushed herself away from the table and got up to begin pacing the room. “It’s not practical. Space travel is ridiculously expensive. Stark can do it because he’s got money coming out of his ass, but the Brisings have nothing! I mean, once they’ve been set up on Venus for a couple of centuries they might be able to start mining and have something to send us, but even once they do, how would they get it to Earth? Us going to Venus to collect it wouldn’t be worth the money it would cost to get there, and in order for them to get to us they’d have to climb up out of the Sun’s gravity well, which is an enormous amount of energy!”

Stark himself had entered the room halfway through this tirade, and was now standing in the doorway looking thoughtful. “You know what?” he said. “If they’ve been consulting with scientists, I bet they know all that.”

“When this Brisings Committee gets in touch with you, just tell them you can get them gold,” Stark
said. “Suddenly they'll wonder why they ever worried about you. But don't tell them you can get them much, or it'll ruin our economy.”

“Oh, it would be decades before I could put together enough to be worth sending to you,” Tiresias said. “As Dr. Foster pointed out…”

“No, it doesn't matter,” Stark said. “Just the promise of gold from another planet would make half the guys on Wall Street throw themselves into the Hudson. If you don't understand why,” he added, “then don't bother trying. Just accept that for all our inventiveness, there are times when Earthlings are really, really, really stupid.”

Very late the next evening, Jane was up and working again. She would need a new project for when this was all over, and she was thinking about the idea of doing more with the Brisings' dark matter map. Maybe Tiresias could tell them something about dark energy, which was a force any civilization harnessing gravity would have had to learn about – especially if they were traveling between galaxies. Trying to do that without taking the expansion of the universe into account would be like trying to do GPS without correcting for relativity. The error would seem tiny at first, but could add up into something disastrous.

“Hey, Tiresias,” she said, turning on the radio. “Are you still awake?”

“Yes, I am,” Tiresias replied. “Sacajawea has been reminding me for the past several hours that I really ought to sleep, but I've tried and I can't. I feel that I'll sleep on Venus. Once I arrive, I'll feel like I've earned it.”

“Yeah,” said Jane. She understood that idea, even knowing it wasn't a rational one – some things just couldn't be set aside, even if sleeping would help her to deal with them. Maybe when Tiresias got to Venus, Jane would sleep, too. “Listen,” she said. “As long as we're both awake, I've got some questions about your dark matter map.”

“Of course,” said Tiresias. “May I ask you something, as well? Are you aware of life anywhere else in your solar system besides Earth and Europa? When I used the Mind Gem I couldn't sense any other conscious intelligence that close, but just knowing there's life on your world with all that water and oxygen has made me wonder if I even know what life is.”

“We have no idea,” Jane replied. She'd been trying not to think about the life on Europa – people had suspected it was there for years, and now just as they'd gotten confirmation it existed, they'd lost any chance to study it. “There might have been life on Mars millions of years ago. Something there could have survived. And there's a moon of Saturn, Enceladus, that has a similar structure. Heck, Jupiter itself is full of organic compounds! That's what makes the stripes pink.” The possibilities were endless, and that was exactly what Jane loved best about space.

The Brisings, she observed, were not made of organic compounds. According to the information Pandora had given the Vision, they were made of metals and silicates, and didn't require water to survive. Earth's scientists, too, needed to re-evaluate what they considered alive. NASA's whole search for life on Mars had been based on the mantra, follow the water. In hindsight, that seemed very narrow-minded indeed.

“I think Jupiter itself may be too violent for life,” Tiresias said, “but then, I can't be sure of that anymore, either. And other bodies in your system also show evidence of complex chemistries. The red moon of Saturn, for example, or...”

“Titan!” Jane interrupted with a smile. “Titan is a classic example of a hypothetical home for life! We
may have already detected it, actually – the composition of the Titanian atmosphere should not be stable over long periods, but it is.”

“If your people would like me to pay you somehow for the right to live on Venus, maybe they would accept my help in searching for other forms of life,” Tiresias suggested. “The idea that such things exist just... oh.” She fell silent.

“Yes?” Jane asked.

A moment passed before Tiresias spoke again. “Maybe not,” she said. “I told Stark I wouldn't pursue science anymore.”

For a moment Jane literally could not believe her ears. No way Tiresias could have said that – how could anybody just decide not to pursue science? “What?” she asked. “Are you crazy?”

“No!” Tiresias said quickly. “No, I'm not... at least, not in the way you're implying. But when I've pursued new avenues of research in the past, it always seems to...”

Jane interrupted. “What about Brisingr? You fit an entire ecosystem into a spaceship, ready to grow when you touch down! That had to involve some serious research, and it hasn't backfired on you!”

“Brisingr is no different from any other terraforming project,” Tiresias said dismissively, as if it were on the order of a child's science fair project. “I had to clone the cargo instead of just collecting embryos, but I didn't need anything more than a basic grounding in biology for that.”

“Biology's what we've just been talking about,” Jane pointed out. “If that's what you think you can do without putting anybody in danger, then do that, but never stop doing science!” She leaned closer to the radio, knowing Tiresias couldn't see her, but hoping the urgency got across in her voice. “Look, when I had the Reality Gem, that hurt, that was horrible, and it could have been very destructive if I'd let it, but that doesn't make me want to avoid Infinity Stones in the future. I want to know more about them and if for some reason I couldn't do that, I'd be miserable. You're a scientist. You need to explore!”

“But what if I do something terrible again?” Tiresias asked. “I am... Stark says I'm a mad scientist.”

“All scientists are mad,” said Jane – one of her professors had told her that once as a joke, but somehow it made perfect sense to her. “Science isn't the problem, though. The problem is engineers. Scientists just learn how the universe works. It's engineers who build stuff with it. Remember we said Oppenheimer built the bomb and Truman used it? Well, it was Einstein who came up with the equations in the first place, and he was horrified by what people did with them. If you want to look for life in the solar system, I will help you,” Jane promised. “Okay? You can I can decide where to look and what to look for, and Stark can build us the stuff to get there.”

“Won't Stark be upset that I lied to him?” asked Tiresias anxiously. “I've done so much of that.”

“You didn't lie, you changed your mind,” said Jane. “And no, he won't – not when it's science at stake. He'll be thrilled.” And if he wasn't, Jane would smack him one.
Tiresias did try to rest as Brisingr came closer and closer to Venus, but she was mostly too restless – and when she did sleep, it was fitful and full of nightmares. She would wake up calling for Pandora, only to remember that Pandora was dead, and had been for months, yet another casualty of Tiresias' hubris. At such times she would lie awake in the darkness, ignoring Sacajawea asking her if she wanted the lights on, and wonder what the end of her journey would really be. It didn't seem right, somehow, that she would actually arrive at her destination, not after so many failures and close calls. Surely something else was going to go wrong at the last moment, snatching defeat from the very jaws of victory.

Her rational mind knew this was a baseless fear, but as the time drew closer, Tiresias found herself increasingly jumpy. She obsessively checked and re-checked various systems, looking for the inevitable tiny fault that would be her undoing. What if life support failed? What if the singularity destabilized? There were so many tiny things that could go wrong. Even if the onboard systems were working perfectly, a threat could come from outside. What if an asteroid slipped through the sensors? What if the star surged in activity, vomiting enough hot plasma to overwhelm the ark's magnetic field?

Once she'd reached the new planet and settled into orbit, there was another set of worries. What if the atmosphere were thicker than she'd thought, and her orbit decayed until the entire ark burned up on its way to a crash landing? What if her sensors had been lying to her from the beginning, and this was actually another cold, toxic world like Earth, where she could not survive? Or worst of all, what if it were already teeming with life?

Stark and Dr. Foster helped her choose a landing location, based on maps the humans had made using an orbiting probe. They found a nice, flat spot in an area called Niobi Planitia, just north of the Aphrodite mountains.

“I don't know what to tell you about the names,” Stark said apologetically, as they discussed the choice over the radio. “The International Astronomical Union made a rule that all features on Venus get named after women, but the names themselves are pretty random. They're mostly from mythology... although there's a peak in the Aphrodites called Mount Foster.”

“There is?” Dr. Foster asked.

“You didn't know that?” Stark was surprised. “They went and named mountains for every woman who's ever won a Nobel Prize. There's a Mount Cho, too – and I'm kind of hoping Pepper's work with vaccinations will earn her a Mount Potts eventually, but in the mean time she says she's not jealous. Anyway, Terry,” he said, “I guess you don't have to keep the names if you don't like them. We can't really force you to use them.”

“No, I'll keep them,” Tiresias decided. The pre-existing names would give this world some history. Her children were going to have to learn their entire past from Tiresias herself – this would be one thing she could give them that she hadn't tainted. “I'd like to hear the stories behind them sometime. And since we're already talking about it,” she said, “I would like to know about the name Venus. Where does it come from?”

“Venus.” Stark sounded thoughtful. “I'm not entirely sure. I mean, it's the name of a goddess, but I don't know what it actually means. It could be one of those words where it's so old that nobody actually remembers...”
“It means exceptionally desirable,” said a different voice, neither Stark's nor Dr. Foster's. Tiresias had heard it before, but it took her a moment to remember the name that went with it. Agent Romanov.

“How do you know that?” asked Stark. “Or is this just the thing where you know everything again?”

“Fallaces sunt rerum species,” Romanov replied, which must have meant something to Stark that it didn't to Tiresias. The phrase clearly wasn't in Sacajawea's translation software. “The goddess Venus was the most beautiful in the pantheon. The planet was named after her because it shone so brightly.”

“There you have it,” Stark said. “What do you think?”

Exceptionally desirable. Tiresias smiled. “Yes, I like that,” she said. This world was, after all, the thing she wanted most in the cosmos.

A few more days passed and then, at last, she was actually in the landing shuttle descending through the swirling yellow clouds. The Vision had some to join her, but since there was only one seat he was floating behind her, leaning over her shoulder to see out the windshield. It was so odd to feel turbulence again, or the weight of real gravity. As they sank through the cloud layers, rain pelted the windshield and ran down it in rivulets of steaming acid. For a few minutes visibility was nearly zero, but then suddenly the clouds cleared, and there was a landscape spread out beneath them.

What Tiresias said when she saw it was a Brising expletive with no English translation. The best equivalent might have been a whispered oh my god.

The world below her was an utter wasteland, nothing but gravel and slabs of broken black rock all the way to the foot of the mountains. A few small volcanic vents were pouring dark smoke into the thick, shimmering air, and a hint of motion suggested a river of relatively fresh lava winding its slow-motion way across the landscape. Lightning flickered in the clouds above, arcing between the different layers but never reaching the ground. It looked so familiar, and yet so wrong. When Tiresias had looked down on such landscapes before, they'd been bristling with metallic trees, bubbling with pools of sulfur. This was so bleak and dead... almost as if...

Almost as if there'd been life there once, before an outside force sucked it all up. As if this were one of the dead, desiccated worlds Polyphemus had left in Andromeda. Tiresias closed her eyes, trying to shut out the sight, but it lingered as if burned into the backs of her eyes. In her head she could still hear her creation taunting her.

Isn't this what you wanted, Mother? All minds in the galaxy unified?

“Are you all right?” asked the Vision. “Your circulatory and respiratory rates have increased dramatically.”

Tiresias shook herself back to reality. “Yes! Yes, I'm all right,” she lied, and the Vision let it rest. Pandora would have known she was lying. Tiresias thought regretfully. Pandora would have given her medicine, insisting all the harder for each time Tiresias refused it – but Pandora was gone. Tiresias would have to deal with this the way she'd always dealt with everything else, alo...

No, she wasn't alone, was she? The Vision was here, and the Avengers on Earth were hanging on her broadcast and would help if they could. After all this time, and after all her mistakes, Tiresias was not alone.

The lander set down on the regolith with a crunch. She turned off the engines and for the first couple
of minutes she simply sat there with her eyes closed, listening. Except for the small musical noises the lander made as its components cooled, there was silence. This world had no streams to bubble, no leaves to rustle in the wind, no animals to call out in fear or flee from the alien machine that had just landed in there midst.

Then she made herself get up. This was it – this was the last chance for something to go horribly wrong. Tiresias sucked in a breath through her teeth, and then hit the switch to open the airlock.

Air rushed in at once – real, fresh, warm air of a type she hadn't felt in... well, in millions of years if she counted her time in hibernation. It seemed to send electricity sizzling over her as she breathed it in. After a moment more spent gathering her thoughts and her courage, Tiresias picked up a metal box, like a small briefcase, and carried it outside.

Two steps down, and then her bare feet touched the warm basalt. She'd made it. She was here standing on the new world.

It was a little hard to believe. Over five million years ago, an unthinkably powerful telescope had teased the spectrum of this world's atmosphere out of the glare of its sun, and identified it as the single best place in this entire galaxy for her to relocate. Now, after so much work and so many near failures, after losing her last friend from home in the form of Pandora, and coming to terms with the idea that she might not make it, here she was. Tiresias had reached her destination at last, and the people of Earth had decided that this planet was hers, even if only conditionally.

For a few moments she was too overcome with emotion to react at all. She was terrified that she might wake up and find that this was only a dream. Maybe Tiresias was actually still in hibernation, somewhere in intergalactic space. Maybe she was still on the outskirts of this system, waiting for Polyphemus to devour her and then this galaxy as well. Or maybe she was even the last living thing alone on the surface of her own dead world.

The wind in her hair was real, though. The smell warm new rock was in her nose, the grit of dusty stone under her feet. It was happening. She'd made it.

She'd won.

Tiresias did not weep because she could not. Her species did not respond to extreme emotion with tears. Instead, she stood very still with her head bowed, letting the flood of relief wash over her. That was all it was, really, was just relief. There was no joy, and very little satisfaction. She was just glad it was over.

“Are you quite sure you're all right?” asked the Vision.

“Yes,” she repeated, and this time it was a bit less of a lie.

Around one of the volcanic chimneys, the cooled lava had a silvery sheen on the surface. Tiresias recognized that. She set her box down, and went to poke through the thin crust that had formed on the molten rock. It didn't take much effort to punch through, and thick slime, glowing red-orange, welled up around her finger, just as it had when she'd done this as a child.

“What does that feel like?” asked the Vision, watching.

“Warm,” Tiresias replied. Warm and gooey and fertile, all ready for things to grow. She shook the droplets of magma off her hand and went to fetch the box she'd brought.

Inside there were seedlings, little silvery curling stems with a few black flakes hanging from them. Glasswort was always one of the first things to sprout in new lava floes. In Brisingr's hold these had
been carefully maintained so that they would stay healthy without getting too big. Now Tiresias chose one, crumbled the loose stone away from its root, and planted it in the hole she'd poked in the lava surface.

Immediately, the sprout felt the warm energy of the stone, and it was just what was needed. Within seconds it was growing before Tiresias' eyes, siphoning heat and minerals out of the lava to build itself. Shiny black mica leaves sprouted from the silver stems, branching out like glittering fractals, and soon there was a proper little bush there, ready for the next, more slow-growing phase of its life cycle.

“I didn't expect that,” said the Vision, leaning closer to inspect. “Do they always do that?”

“Not usually so fast,” said Tiresias, taking out a second sprout. “Here there's nothing else growing in the lava to compete with it.”

An hour later, she had the beginnings of a little thicket in the lava, and roots would soon start to invade the older rock beneath. A month from now they would have started chewing that stone into recognizable soil. Tiresias had brought out other boxes as well, releasing spores of fungi that could grow around the stones. Small bristling patches of crystals were already springing up, producing drops of liquid sulfur that would someday feed insects and other organisms.

In this one tiny patch, the planet was starting to come to life. It was the most beautiful thing she could possibly imagine.

“I should probably head back now,” said the Vision. “I can't help you when I have to remain phased out in order to survive in your environment, and you're going to be too busy to talk much.”

“Oh, the real work won't even begin until it's time to start adding the animals,” Tiresias said. “And then the people.” Without Pandora's help, that was a horribly daunting idea. She was going to have to raise an entire civilization, and teach them caution and humility so they wouldn't end up like her. “I wish Pandora were still with me,” she said. “There are so many reasons why, but she would have been a much better teacher for the children, too. She would have been able to teach them history. All I'll have is a lot of stories I barely remember. Fairy tales.”

The Vision's eyes lit up, quite literally, and he smiled as if she'd just said something wonderful. “Tiresias,” he said, “I think I've found you a name!”

“What?” she asked. “What sort of name?”

He smiled. “Its exact meaning is disputed. It may mean Belonging to a Free Kingdom or it might mean Born of a Lion. The latter is a metaphor, suggesting that the bearer of the name is uncommonly brave and tenacious.”

Tiresias didn't feel like she deserved either of those accolades, but she also knew that wasn't how the people of Earth gave names. The significance of their names, she'd learned, was not the literal meaning, but the previous bearer. “Whose name was it?”

“A woman who told fairy tales,” said the Vision. “The setup of her story involves human pair-bonding rituals and might not make much sense to you, but the important point is that she survived, by sheer ingenuity, where all others before her had failed.”

Tiresias kind of liked that idea. “How do you say it?” she asked.

“Scheherezade,” the Vision said.
“Scheherezade,” she echoed, rolling the complicated syllables around in her mouth. She liked the sound of it. “I’ve already been thinking of names for the children. They’ll be Hope and Curiosity and Courage. Memory, Intellect, Restitution.”

“How about Redemption?” suggested the Vision.

“Yes.” Tiresias nodded. “I like that, too.”

Six months later, in the Anaheim Convention Center in California, fans of every shape and size were waiting in a meandering line between stanchions and ribbon, hoping for their idol’s autograph. As lines at conventions went, it was a fairly orderly one, everybody well-behaved and talking quietly, until a woman in a carefully researched Aayla Secura costume (Clone Wars incarnation) let out an indignant squeak as somebody pushed her backside. She spun around to confront her molester, but found nobody there... only the rest of the crowd being pushed out of the way by somebody very short with no regard for the order of the line.

It was possible to follow the progress of this individual by the jumps and yelps as it elbowed its way to the table where the guest of honour was signing autographs. A voice muttered things like “thecu_the me” and “coming through” as it passed. A few people said things like “sorry” and “hey, there's a line!” but those who caught sight of the intruder were more likely to curse in surprise or just stare, wide-eyed.

“What the...?” somebody demanded.

“That's a duck, man!” shouted another person. “That is a duck!”

“Yeth, thank you, good job recognizing a duck!” snarled Howard as he pushed through the front of the crowd. He slammed a pair of feathery three-fingered hands down on the tabletop, and his beady dark eyes met the frightened ones of the human sitting there.

“George Lucath,” said Howard darkly. “We meet at laht.”

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